

The Young and the Jobless

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Some say that turning thirty is a significant personal milestone; that one should be embracing the powers that come with being a bona fide grown-up person, ready to make their mark on the world. How often we hear that when you turn the big 3-0, life truly begins.

Others dread the event completely, holding onto whatever moments are left of the proverbial notion of 'youth' with all of its wild imaginings, spirited adventures and all round joyful and carefree outlook on life.

I teetered between both mindsets in the lead up to my thirtieth birthday in January of 2016, though ultimately hopeful as the brand new year fortuitously welcomed with it a brand new decade of my life. I quietly anticipated the promises of new experiences and opportunities, especially having recently started an exciting new job at a marketing agency.

Prior to this, I enjoyed a steady and fruitful media career at one of Australia's leading free-to-air television networks (built after years of scrappy freelancing gigs, consistent rejection and 'burning the midnight oil' just like most of my newly graduated, job-seeking peers).

One rarely foresees the pending lows while riding high on the waves of success, and at twenty-nine I felt invincible in many ways, comforted by the security of finally establishing myself in an industry I had desired a career in for so long.

Yet my thirtieth year wasn't to be the levelling-up in my professional life as I had convinced myself it would be. Instead, it was to be somewhat of an undoing. A crash and burn if you will.

A fall from grace.

I acknowledge that ego may have blinded me from forecasting my eventual retrenchment, ego that provided me a false sense of security in my value as an employee. It seemed impossible in my view that someone who brought key skills and a strong work ethic to the workplace, could also make a decent candidate for redundancy. Perhaps I was ignorant and prideful in this belief.

Millennials are often criticised for being an entitled generation driven by ambition; too reliant on life's 'easy wins' and in constant expectation of outcomes misaligned with the quality of our efforts. Given the consumer-driven world we live in, perhaps it's true that our priorities lean towards the superficial, resulting in an over-indulgence in immediate and temporary pleasures. Older generations are therefore often quick to point to the humorous (now clichéd) deduction that the reason Millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) cannot afford to buy a house, is because of our penchant for soy lattes and avocado toast.

The concepts of responsibility and humility are not commonly associated with young people, but I believe it simplistic to merely judge and overlook the impact that culture has on our youth. A culture shaped by every prior generation's behaviours and contributions.

To this day, the reasons for why I was fired from that job remain unverified. It may have been due to problems in company cashflow, interpersonal discordance or a clash in creative vision and values. Most likely, a mixture of all. I have come to accept that the details are irrelevant to the outcome which was simply, that after years of building up and flourishing in a professional full-time career, I suddenly found myself unemployed.

It is a confronting admission but the truth is that when I lost my job, I sort of lost myself too.

I was thirty at this point yet feeling eighteen again, but only the parts of being eighteen when you have no clue what to do with your life. Even with some wonderful foundational years of growth and learning which have brought you to where you are, you feel far from ready to tackle whatever lies ahead. The grave uncertainty looms over like a shadow, enabling every anxiety, doubt and fear to outwardly manifest.

The ego which had granted me confidence to thrive in the workplace all those years had now retreated into her shell, pondering who she was, who she could and should be, and how she would survive outside of the workforce.

It was in this season that I ruminated on the harmful idea subtly permeating modern society: that who we are is defined by our jobs.

I was reminded of my university days, where life seemed to consist of multiple realms; one where I was a diligent student, another as a weary retail worker, an enthusiastic community volunteer, aspiring filmmaker and relentless job-seeker; all whilst doing my utmost to be a good daughter, sister and friend.

As rich and as multi-faceted my life was then, there was a struggle that was once again becoming familiar: I was unable to express myself with certainty, nor confidently present myself to others. Whenever faced with the question, "*what do you do?*" or invited to introduce and share something about myself, I buckled under the pressure. How could I possibly use just a simple word or phrase to describe what I'm doing with my life? How will people perceive me based on my answer?

In the past, the labels that were easiest to offer were 'student', 'graduate', and what became my most common response, "*I work in retail.*" These were safe identity markers, ones that I felt clearly met societal expectations. Offering these titles ensured validation from both the people I know and those I had just met. The *retail* label was one I used all the years between graduating and finding a job, although I had been doing so much more to build myself up personally and professionally. It was the label best understood by the people around me.

Perhaps because it reflected a conventional job, and one that actually paid me.

Although I appreciated the times I had such labels to rely on, I have always questioned their merit. I have learned through experience and observation that labels prompt people to categorise and stereotype one another. There are generalisations made about lawyers, teachers and accountants, just as there are about the Baby Boomer and Millennial generations. There are undoubtedly strong commonalities between people who belong to these groups, sometimes positive, yet most times negative. With such stereotypes embedded into society, it is no surprise that on an interpersonal

and profoundly personal level, we often rely on labels to define who we are. Over time, I've found this to be a very limiting thing.

As a newly unemployed person whose career had become a huge part of my identity, I felt inadequate without a label, specifically one which fit society's standard for success. At the very least, I longed to be known as 'employed.' Again, this feeling caused me to revisit the uncertain and doubt-filled years that I endured between graduating university and working full-time.

This transition period was most difficult to navigate, especially with my ambitions to work in the very competitive media industry. The road towards securing full-time employment was a long and confusing one, and I was foolish to believe that being an Honours graduate would grant me any shortcuts. This wasn't quite the reality presented to me as a student. I, like most young people who choose to pursue higher education, wholeheartedly believed that a university degree was a one-way ticket to a stable job and secure future.

To unexpectedly find myself in limbo again, now at thirty years old, was greatly unsettling. Despite my years of industry experience, my confidence was shaken and I was like a young graduate all over again, longing to contribute my skills and ideas yet lacking the clarity and encouragement to get started.

This state of mind helped me empathise with the youth of today, Millennials and Generation Z (those born from 1997 onwards), whom the world seems to rely on for a brighter socio-economic future, yet rarely advocates for in the workforce. I became fascinated by research carried out by The Foundation For Young Australians, perplexed by the findings and concerned for those on the brink of adulthood and those already within it who are lacking a sense of purpose and direction.

In their 2018 report *The New Work Reality*, FYA confirmed that out of 60% of young Australians aged 25 who hold a post-school qualification, 50% are either unemployed or underemployed. Just like I was all those years ago as a fresh graduate, so are 50% of tertiary-educated youth in

Australia struggling to find enough work to sustain their livelihoods (as would be equivalent to the standard hours of full-time employment).

I recognised my ignorance of this, having assumed that given the advancement of technology and diversification of jobs, young people today with all of these resources and options, must be relishing in the abundance of opportunities to establish themselves in the workforce.

Maturing in my career, I gradually adopted the perception that those younger than me are too privileged, entitled and lack the required resilience to accomplish their goals. Without disregarding those parts that ring true, I began to realise that fixating on such unfavourable characteristics was not at all helpful in guiding and empowering the next generation.

Losing my job soon transformed into a humbling exercise in understanding the plight of Australian youth today. I discovered a kindred connection with them as I myself revisited the silent struggle of not feeling worthy, knowledgeable or confident enough to raise my voice.

As I contemplated my next career move and the overall trajectory of my life, I surrounded myself with young people also in transition. I recognised our shared worries about the future and our passionate attempts to make positive change in the world. I identified the areas that hinder young people from finding purpose and making progress, and it became clear to me that these 'youth issues' are not just theirs, but *ours* as a community, as a nation.

One of the most common challenges that young job-seekers face is being uncompetitive in the job application process due to their lack of work experience. It is somewhat of a vicious cycle as their lack of experience often negates them from landing job opportunities, yet they are in desperate need of job opportunities to help them build on their experience.

This unkind reality was prevalent in my own situation. Despite working for years in a specific industry, on paper I lacked the necessary experience required to apply for new kinds of jobs and

even different roles within the same industry. Through my conversations and interactions with recent graduates, it was affirmed just how intimidating the job search process is for Millennials and Generation Z.

Young people (even those well-educated) often fear the process, knowing that they enter the workforce disadvantaged by default. Most lack the tangibility of solid employment years, along with a lack of conviction in their skillset and general job-readiness.

FYA report that three in four (76%) young people do not believe they possess the relevant vocational and practical work experience to gain full-time work, and 25% of them believe they lack the necessary job application skills to find the work. I've discovered over the last few of years just how much this lack of belief greatly hinders the job search. Many young people, even with tertiary qualifications and strong aptitude, concede defeat before they even try.

I have been asked many times by graduates that I have mentored, whether it is even worth applying for a job upon realising they cannot meet all of the required criteria. Criteria that may be ideal for the employer, but rather far-reaching for any single candidate to fulfil. Whether it is 5+ years of experience in the advertised role, proficiency in multiple software programs or additional certification in a specialised area; many graduates are left feeling inadequate and disheartened before they even attempt to write a job application.

The global pandemic which has disrupted all aspects of our livelihoods in 2020, raises further concerns on youth unemployment and underemployment. Engaging with youth and youth workers alike, I am learning that from this issue stems a range of other concerning matters to which this demographic is most vulnerable. Matters such as housing and accommodation, welfare accessibility, income prosperity and notably, youth resilience and mental health.

Dealing with the psychological and emotional effects of my redundancy, brought to light just how much I allowed my job to define my personal worth and identity. I had relied on my career to

provide me a sense of validation, not only because it granted me financial independence, but also a sense of security on a much deeper level. I believed that my job somehow legitimised me to the outside world. I believed that being employed affirmed my success and value as a person.

The young people I have mentored over the years hold similar beliefs. Without an education or a job to identify themselves by, there is a real fear they will be judged or regarded as failures. Long gone are the days where a university degree guarantees full-time employment, yet our culture still promises youth that job security is assured through tertiary study. It may not apply to all pathways and industries, but many academic disciplines across our modern education system do not lead to practical job outcomes (most significantly apparent in the arts and creative sectors).

On average, it takes 4.7 years for a young person to transition from full-time education to full-time work and in an economy adjusting and recovering from a pandemic, the state of unemployment in general is bound to further impact the rate of *youth* unemployment. While prospective government funding initiatives may help incentivise businesses to hire more young people, there is cause to consider and address *why* many young people, even the tertiary-educated, are struggling to enter the workforce or navigate it once they are there.

Our dynamic working culture has conditioned young people to believe that their personal success and worth is found in their education and employment. The faster they secure one or both of these things, the better they seem to feel about their place in society. It is a common pattern that graduates who struggle to find work, make a return to study, enrolling in post-graduate degrees, short courses and online classes to supplement their current qualifications. Perhaps through their eyes, it seems less a failure to keep on studying, than to keep looking for jobs and not succeeding.

Although skilled and educated, many graduates lack clarity on their career goals and thus hesitate to put themselves forward to potential employers or network within their chosen industry. Many do not feel ready to contribute to a workplace without the assurance of proper training and support.

Many are searching for their 'dream job', convinced that the perfect job exists and once they find it, they must commit for life. I have also learned that most young people are hungry not just for any kind of work, but for *meaningful work*, for employment that offers more than just good money and stability. It is important to young people that a potential employer prioritises an inclusive and empowering workplace culture and stands for a strong social cause.

For all of these ideals however, Millennials and Generation Z face the reality that such jobs are incredibly difficult to acquire given their lack of practical experience and perceptions of their generational attitudes. The gap between education and the workforce seemingly does not narrow as much as it widens, and we tend to overlook the notion that it is up to *all* of us - across demographics, sectors and industries - to help build the connecting bridge.

I have been exposed to the dangers of the underlying narrative that we are defined by our jobs and in the nurturing of our youth, this is a key consideration. Perhaps our understanding of employment as the means to an end, must shift towards the ongoing pursuit of new opportunities to do more and give more for the greater good of society. Seeking employment is in essence a holistic endeavour, for it encompasses our innate desires to utilise our skills, engage in community and contribute to worthy causes.

Young people inherently know this and long for this. They exemplify lifestyles and perspectives on the world which are drastically different from times past, and in turn reflect the ever-evolving society and culture in which we all partake. It therefore becomes essential to listen to young people and partner with them as we navigate the times ahead.

To address the short and long-term impacts of youth unemployment is to care for the sustainability of our collective future. Where young people are engaged in meaningful employment, we are better placed to close doors to homelessness, anxiety and depression and instead, open doors to creativity, progress, wellbeing and prosperity, not only for our youth, but for us all.

In our efforts to support the young and the jobless - whether as parents, educators, employers and collaborators - may we learn to look beyond experience and for *potential*; beyond confidence and for *character*; beyond perfection and for *passion*. May we look past generational stereotypes and challenge the conventional markers of success.

As I discovered during the lowest point of my professional life, whether you're eighteen, thirty or seventy-five, your job (or lack thereof) does not solely define who you are. For each of us is a unique and rich tapestry of desires, dreams, ideas and experiences; each of us called to light a candle amidst the darkness of the world.

The next generation stands ready, candles in hand, looking to those before them to lead the way.

In the words of American Educator and Civil Rights Leader Mary Mcleod Bethune:

"We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power toward good ends."

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