



# Young people in Western Melbourne's voices on work

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October 2023



Social Ventures Australia acknowledges Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present, and emerging. We also accept the invitation in the Uluru Statement from the Heart to walk together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

**This report has been prepared by Social Ventures Australia (SVA) Consulting**

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) is a not-for-profit organisation that works with partners to alleviate disadvantage – towards an Australia where all people and communities thrive.

We influence systems to deliver better social outcomes for people by learning about what works in communities, helping organisations be more effective, sharing our perspectives and advocating for change.

SVA Consulting is Australia's leading not-for-profit consultancy. We focus solely on social impact and work with partners to increase their capacity to create positive change. Thanks to more than 15 years of working with not-for-profits, government and funders, we have developed a deep understanding of the sector and 'what works'.

Our team is passionate about what they do and use their diverse experience to work together to solve Australia's most pressing challenges.

This report has been authored by SVA Consulting.

For more information contact us:

[consulting@socialventures.com.au](mailto:consulting@socialventures.com.au)

# About this report

This report was initiated by Social Ventures Australia as part of SVA's Rebuilding the Career Ladder initiative.

SVA's Rebuilding the Career Ladder initiative focusses on improving opportunities for young people from less privileged backgrounds by promoting changes in the hiring and employment practices of employers. It recognises that employers hold the key to improving job quality and rebuilding careers for young people. It includes practical support for employers through [Employer Innovation Labs](#), as well as strategies to address broader obstacles to employer action.

Young people's experiences and perspectives are central to this work. We, and the employers we work with, need to understand the ways in which different employment practices can improve or inhibit young people's success in employment. Young people themselves have many ideas about how employers can encourage and support young workers. Through this type of research we hope to ensure those ideas are heard.

This research into the voices of young people in Western Melbourne provides a foundation for the work we will be doing with employers in the region. It follows [a similar piece of work in Western Sydney](#) which has provided critical insights for employers there.

## Acknowledgments of support

SVA acknowledges the Macquarie Group Foundation and the Paul Ramsay Foundation as major funders of the Rebuilding the Career Ladder initiative.



# Executive summary

In 2019 the [Grattan Institute](#) warned that “today’s young Australians are in danger of being the first generation in memory to have lower living standards than their parents’ generation.” Young people experience significantly higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than their older counterparts. Many experience low wages, limited progression and casualisation. These experiences of work have profound impacts on their health, incomes and future prospects. In addition, those who entered the labour force at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly poorer mental health than their predecessors.

Listening to the voices of these young people can help employers ensure that their workplaces are set up to enable them to succeed. This report shares findings from a qualitative study of the experiences of looking for work and working from young people in Melbourne’s west. Twenty four (24) young people were interviewed for the research. None had university degrees, and over 90% had been or were currently in paid employment. The study aims to help employers and others understand their experiences and shares their recommendations for what employers can do to improve recruitment processes and make great workplaces.

## Key findings of the research

### Recruitment processes

Young people spoke about several challenges they faced in dealing with recruitment processes:

- Employers requiring significant experience for entry level jobs (often 1-2 years in similar roles) which excludes those who are early in their careers or looking for their first job
- Not hearing any communication or feedback about submitted job applications – a demoralising experience when young people are applying for lots of jobs over a long period
- Unclear or inaccurate job advertisements that do not sufficiently describe what the job involves, its requirements, pay and conditions
- Online recruitment processes that do not give young people the best chance to present themselves to employers, or see a workplace and team environment first-hand

### Poor work experiences

Many of the young people interviewed had only experienced casual employment in entry level roles, with irregular shift work, variable hours and low wages. Common challenges shared in the interviews were:

- Employers not paying fairly – for example withholding pay, not paying for overtime, and paying below minimum wage
- Employers reducing hours or allocating shifts unfairly or without communication – sometimes because of apparent favouritism or punishment
- Workplaces that were unsafe – for example workplaces that were cluttered or not properly ventilated, not providing safety gear, and supervisors pushing staff to keep working when injured

## The role of supervisors

Young people reported that supervisors have a huge impact on their experiences of work. Young people's reflections on good and bad experiences of supervisors point towards three positive attributes that help young people succeed:

1. **Adopt a growth mindset to mistakes and learning:** Great supervisors understand that mistakes are an opportunity to learn. Young people saw great supervisors respond to mistakes by acknowledging that mistakes are normal, taking the time to teach and supporting young people to 'own up' for mistakes
2. **Be understanding and supportive:** Great supervisors have some understanding of what employees who have a disability, mental health challenges or neurodivergence might need to be effective at work. This doesn't mean having in-depth knowledge, but a level of understanding and empathy and a willingness to make some practical adjustments.
3. **Be approachable:** Great supervisors treat employees 'like people, not numbers' – examples from the interviews include acknowledging performance, encouraging employees to try new things and checking in with employees to ask how they are going

## What young people recommend

### Improving the recruitment process

Young people shared **six recommendations** for employers to improve the recruitment process:

1. **Reconsider minimum experience requirements in job advertisements to avoid excluding young people who are just starting their working life**
2. **Be transparent about the recruitment process, and responsive to job applicants: including providing information about the recruitment process with timeframes, and providing feedback on unsuccessful applications**
3. **Offer in-person options during the recruitment process for young people who feel they perform better in-person, and who want to see the workplace and team environment first-hand**
4. **Be honest and clear in job advertisements so young people can understand what they are applying for and make sure it meets their requirements in terms of pay, hours and location**
5. **Help young people who are LGBTIQ+ or from culturally and linguistically diverse communities to feel welcome and safe in the recruitment process, so they are not facing additional barriers**
6. **Advertise jobs where young people will see them such as on social media and through youth organisations**

### Creating great workplaces

Young people shared many reflections on what makes a great workplace – one where they want to stay and grow in their career. This is a workplace where:

1. **The work culture is respectful and supportive. Young people want to feel valued as a human, supported when times get tough, and respected regardless of their gender identity or race. Supervisors play an essential role in this**
2. **Employees are remunerated and assigned work fairly. Young people want to be paid for the work that they have done, at least at award wages. They want employers and supervisors to be fair and transparent in making decisions about the allocation of shifts.**

3. Employees have opportunities to learn and develop. Young people want to see there are opportunities in a workplace for them to grow and learn at work, pick up new skills and take on new roles.
4. The business is well run. Young people want to work in a well-run business – that is well organised and treats customers well.
5. Employees feel they belong. Young people want to feel comfortable, welcome and connected to colleagues at work.

# Background to the study

In 2019 the [Grattan Institute](#) warned that ‘Today’s young Australians are in danger of being the first generation in memory to have lower living standards than their parents’ generation.’ According to the Productivity Commission, young people’s incomes actually declined relative to older workers following the Global Financial Crisis. When it analysed the reasons for falling youth incomes, the Productivity Commission pointed to issues of job quality – a combination of underemployment and poorer opportunities for progression. At the same time many employers complain of lack of workers, and the country faces deepening shortages in key skills.

SVA’s Rebuilding the Career Ladder initiative focusses on improving opportunities for young people from less privileged backgrounds by promoting changes in the hiring and employment practices of employers. It recognises that employers hold the key to improving job quality and rebuilding career pathways for young people.

To understand what employers can do to improve opportunities we need to understand what young people themselves want and need. Their experiences of trying to find the type of workplace that meets their needs and supports their growth are important to understanding how employers can respond.

This report, undertaken by SVA Consulting to support the Rebuilding the Career Ladder initiative, explores the employment experiences of young people in Melbourne’s west. It provides essential background information for SVA’s work with employers through the Western Melbourne Employer Innovation Lab. A companion piece, focused on Western Sydney can be accessed [here](#).

## About Western Melbourne

Western Melbourne is an area of high population growth, including many new arrivals to Australia. Sixty percent (60%) of residents report that both parents were born overseas, compared with 37% of all Australians<sup>1</sup>. The area includes suburbs which are among Victoria’s most disadvantaged in terms of income, health, access to services and other measures<sup>2</sup>. Youth unemployment in Western Melbourne is higher than that of Victoria and Australia (Western Melbourne: 10.9%, Victoria: 8.5%; Australia 8.6%)<sup>3</sup>. While Indigenous Australians represent only 1% of the local population, they account for over 8% of the caseload of the local youth employment service. Young people from refugee backgrounds (7.4%) and with disabilities (12.8%) are also highly represented in these services<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> ABS 2021, Western Melbourne Community Profile.

<sup>2</sup> Tanton, R., Dare, L., Miranti, R., Vidyattama, Y., Yule, A. and McCabe, M. (2021), Dropping Off the Edge 2021: Persistent and multilayered disadvantage in Australia, Jesuit Social Services: Melbourne.

<sup>3</sup> Jobs and Skills Australia, Western Melbourne Labour Market Dashboard, August 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Jobs and Skills Australia, Transition to Work caseload data at 20 June 2023.

## About this study

The purpose of this research was to understand the employment experiences of young people in Western Melbourne. By conducting qualitative interviews with a small sample of young people, the research aimed to gather personal stories of working experiences and examples of challenges faced to identify common themes.

The target group for the research was young people aged 18-25 living in Western Melbourne, who were currently working or had experience of paid work and were not university educated. The target sample size was 20 (achieved sample was 24). The research aimed to achieve a sample that reflected the cultural and linguistic diversity of Western Melbourne, including interviews with young people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and a balance of genders.

## Who participated in the research

The research was promoted through SVA, Youth Projects (a non-profit youth services organisation) and several other community organisations that support young people in Melbourne's Western suburbs. An information flyer was circulated by these organisations which linked to an online registration form for the interviews. The online form also collected basic demographic information. A total of 59 young people registered to participate through the online form, and a total of 24 young people participated in the interviews. Of those who participated in interviews:

- 45% identified as male, 45% as female and 9% as other gender or did not disclose
- 14% of participants identified as Indigenous.
- 32% identified as living with at least one disability, and 45% stated that they had a mental health condition.
- 41% had not commenced any education or training since secondary school; another 36% started education or training but did not complete it; and 23% were either studying or had completed training. TAFE was the most common place of study.
- 72% of participants were currently unemployed and looking for work (some alongside studying); 18% were currently working, and two people (9%) were not working in both cases because they were caring for siblings.
- Of those who were unemployed, 32% had worked in the last 6 months; 14% last worked 6-12 months ago, and 23% last worked more than 12 months ago. Only 9% (two people) had never had a paid job but had completed unpaid traineeships.



## Research approach

The primary approach for the research was a semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted over three days in July and August 2023. Most interviews were conducted in-person at one of Youth Projects' offices in Western Melbourne (Sunshine, Werribee and Melton). A small number of interviews were conducted via telephone. Approximately half of the in-person interviewees were identified and recruited through the online registration form; the other half were opportunistically recruited by asking young people who were visiting the Youth Projects site on that day if they would like to participate in the interviews. All participants read and signed a consent form that provided information about the purpose of the research, the interview process, how their data would be used and confidentiality.

The aim of this research was to give voice to the lived experiences of young people. The interview was designed to encourage young people to share their experiences of transitioning from secondary school to entering the workforce, applying for work, and being employed. The interviews also gathered suggestions for what employers could do to help young people enter the workforce and retain young people as workers. The interview guide was structured around 7 themes:

1. Transitioning after secondary school into work or further study/training
2. Current or recent work situation
3. Positive and negative experiences of supervisors and workplace culture
4. Applying for work
5. Reasons for wanting to leave or stay in a job
6. Navigating pathways to future career
7. Suggestions for employers

## Limitations

The research exceeded the target sample of 20 young people. While the interviews provided an opportunity to collect rich, qualitative data from each of the young people, the small sample means the findings cannot be generalised to reflect the experiences of all young people in Western Melbourne. Recruitment of interviewees through youth organisations, and through Youth Projects in particular, means that the group was more likely to include those who had faced challenges in finding and sustaining good quality employment.

# Key findings

## Transitioning from secondary school

Young people interviewed had different experiences since leaving secondary school. Some left before starting VCE – one as early as year 8 – while others completed VCE or VCAL.<sup>5</sup> Some had completed further training or education since they left secondary school, others had not. Only two participants had never had a paid job while most had held several jobs, in some cases having had responsibility for managing other staff. While everyone's transition experience was different the interviews found some common themes:

- **Moving from the classroom to work is a challenging transition:** Almost all of the young people interviewed described the transition from secondary school to the workforce as difficult, confusing and daunting. Some said that they felt 'nothing could have prepared them' for the transition. Others reflected that their secondary schooling did not equip them for life after classrooms and tests.

*"It sucks. It's hard making the switch from teenager to adult. You really cross a threshold... There isn't enough education about careers at school."* **Female, 20**

*"Well, because my school forced me out, they did try to help me getting into a course, but at the time I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I ended up just applying to a bunch of workplaces and that's how I got my first job."* **Female, 19**

*"At high school they teach you, but they don't really teach about this part, they don't teach you about work, they don't teach you how to make money or anything. All they teach you is how to do tests. High school is definitely different to this. I learnt more doing Certificates than I did from all my years at school."* **Male, 20**

- **COVID-19 lockdowns made the transition even more difficult:** Young people in this age group who are living in Western Melbourne had to make this transition during or after the extensive COVID-19 lockdowns that affected all of metropolitan Melbourne. For those who were still in school, the shift to remote learning made it hard to speak with teachers for advice about next steps. For many who had recently left school, high unemployment and lockdowns made it very difficult to look for work.

*"[Leaving school] feels like being dropped in the ocean. You don't have many options. Because of COVID we couldn't get much help from our teachers."* **Male, 18**

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<sup>5</sup> VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) is the Victorian equivalent of the HSC. VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) is a recognised senior secondary qualification with a more vocational focus and is a pathway to TAFE, apprenticeships or traineeships.

- **Young people are determined:** Despite these challenges, some young people spoke about their determination to find a way through the difficult transition period, and said that while it was a tough journey, it was easier once they warmed up to it and started finding their feet.

*“I had no idea. It was a bit exciting, a bit daunting, intimidating, scary. But I was determined. I knew I needed to be independent.” Male, 21*

These experiences highlight how important it is for employers and others to understand the challenges of this period of life and help young people find their way.

## Recruitment processes

Most of the young people were unemployed and looking for work at the time of the interview. Almost all said that they usually applied for jobs through online job sites. Young people spoke about several challenges they faced in navigating employer’s recruitment processes:

- **Employers asking for significant experience:** One of the most common statements from young people about the recruitment process was that too many advertisements for basic entry-level jobs require 1-2 years’ experience or more, which excludes many young people, including those looking for their first job.

*“I love when job ads talk about bringing inexperienced people into the job and teaching them – it feels more comforting to apply for a job like that, where you’re going to be shown the ropes and not thrown into something you don’t know how to do. Being a young person there’s a lot of anxieties with applying for jobs, you’re scared of being thrown into the deep end without having experience. Lot more reassuring and comforting to apply to that job.” Male, 20*

- **Not hearing back about applications:** Many young people shared frustration at the lack of feedback or communication they received from employers upon applying for jobs. Particularly when applying for a lot of jobs, the lack of acknowledgement that applications had been received, or responses to follow up calls and emails, was described as demotivating.

*“Actually give people a chance to have an interview. Or like getting back to people. Because that’s one problem I’ve had – employers will say, I’ll get back to you, and then they never get back to me. And if I try to contact them, they just ignore it.” Female, 19*

- **Unclear or inaccurate job advertisements:** Some believed that some job advertisements were dishonest about the requirements and responsibilities of the job. They reported that many advertisements did not include the hours or pay rate or did not clearly describe the role or workplace environment. They described frustrating experiences of applying for jobs to then find out that the actual conditions did not reflect what was advertised, and wasn’t compatible with what they needed in terms of pay or hours
- **Online interviews limiting interactions:** Some young people expressed a preference for parts of the recruitment process to be in-person. Some said that they felt more comfortable and presented better in in-person job interviews, compared to online screening calls. Some also said

that an in-person job interview gave them a chance to see firsthand the business premises and how management interacted with staff.

*"I wish everything wasn't online. When I first lost my job, I took my resume into the plaza here, and literally only two places took the paper. They said we all do it online now. And I'm like, "Well, I'm here right now, I can start right now, I don't understand what the confusion is!" I just think, at least for students, they should be able to walk in with their resume and they should be able to start tomorrow. The students, they need the experience, businesses need to understand that!"*

**Female, 20**

## Poor work experiences

Most of the young people interviewed reported having some poor experiences of work. Many had only experienced casual employment in entry level roles with irregular shift work, variable hours and low wages (at or just above minimum wage). Common challenges shared were:

- **Employers not paying fairly:** Some young people shared stories of having pay withheld by employers, not being paid for significant overtime, and being paid below the legal minimum wage

*"I worked at a restaurant where I had to force them to pay me. They paid me cash in hand because I was underage, and they worked me too long. I had to threaten to report them before they would pay me. I was excited that maybe my role could change up into becoming a chef or something. But then, once I worked there, that dream that I had of working as a chef just disappeared, because what they treated you like in there is not a work environment I want to be a part of. If you did one wrong move you're just getting yelled at." **Male, 20***

- **Employers reducing or allocating shifts unfairly or without communication:** Some young people spoke about having shifts reduced unexpectedly and without warning or explanation, while others spoke about shifts being allocated to staff unfairly. Some young people believed decisions around shifts were influenced by favouritism (e.g. supervisors giving more or better paid to certain staff and not others). Others thought they got fewer shifts, or stopped getting any shifts, when they turned 18 and their employer was legally required to increase their wage.

*"They have favourites. They give a lot of the shifts and hours to those favourites and think of giving contracts to people that haven't even been there longer than three months. I think there's an unfairness in who is getting shifts and who is not. That kind of makes me want to leave all the time." **Female, 24***

- **Being treated like a number:** Young people shared experiences of workplaces where they did not feel valued or respected. These experiences included workplaces that ignored requests to attend much needed doctor's appointments, discouraged employees to take toilet breaks, did not check in with employees to see how they were going, and made young people feel expendable.

*"At my other warehousing jobs, they pretty much treated you just like a number. At one of them, the turnover rate is crazy – they'll get 50 people in on Monday, and all these people leave by Friday. And it makes sense because they've got people standing in one place for eight hours a*

day, not allowed to do anything, not allowed to complain, hardly allowed to go to the toilet. If you want to go to the toilet, they're gonna roll their eyes and be like, well then go hurry up, you know. But as a company that's not how you should be treating your workers if you want people to stay. I remember last year on New Year's, they were sending out a bonus for people to just stay the whole shift. If you have to pay people like that, isn't there something wrong with your work style? Because people were just leaving mid-shift, they didn't care." **Female, 20**

"Usually in warehousing, you're a number really. You're just one of the pickers. So you fade into the background real quick. At this one I felt treated amazingly. I had a meeting with HR, they just wanted to double check how we were going mentally, how mental health was. Just so they could know that when we're at work, that we're fully at work. And that was great. A workplace hasn't provided that before - just the communication. So that was something that helped me want to stay there." **Male, 22**

"I would tell them three or four weeks and ahead of time about doctor appointments and stuff like that, and then it would come to that week of work, and they just roster me to be on for that day anyway. I just felt like I wasn't really valued." **Male, 24**

- **Unsafe workplaces:** Stories of unsafe workplaces were not uncommon. Examples included kitchens with dangerously slippery floors that were never cleaned, warehouses that were very hot and not properly ventilated (one young person reported that they passed out during a shift and had to be taken to hospital), workplaces that were cluttered and messy, that did not provide safety gear, and supervisors pushing staff to keep working even when they were physically injured. These experiences caused many young people to leave workplaces and industry sectors.

"The floor was that slippery, you couldn't even walk. It was not a safe place to work in. Like they could have had someone coming around with a mop or something but they didn't, they just kept it all there so it was wet and slippery." **Male, 20**

"You get hurt and they keep pushing you. I'd get a Doctor's note saying I need to be on light duties for two weeks and by the end of the two weeks, they're already expecting you to drag the trolley jack around with pallets stacked with drinks and stuff and so your injury never gets better." **Male, 24**

At the same time, most of the young people interviewed also shared positive experiences of work. These included:

- **Supportive supervisors:** Many young people had an experience of working with approachable and encouraging supervisors who helped them settle into work, feel comfortable and learn. Some also experienced supervisors who were flexible and supportive in challenging circumstances, such as when mental health challenges or other circumstances came up at work. These experiences gave young people a sense of what a good supervisor looks like, in some cases providing a helpful contrast to negative experiences (see more on supervisors in the next section).

"So I'm not buddy buddy with the managers but I can't fault them. They're always there for you. They're never rude. You know, they're what you want your managers to be like, especially when a difficult situation arises. They are who you want there. So I've had no complaints with them.

*Whenever you know, I've needed help or I've had to talk to them about something, I've only gotten great responses. So I've been really lucky. Even with other coworkers, like I've made a friend there, which is very hard for me. So like, I get along with a lot of the girls there. So it's just it's very positive and the people there. So that's probably one of the positives.” Female, 24*

- **Positive team environments:** Most young people had examples of experiences of positive team environments where they felt some belonging, felt comfortable, and could enjoy being around their colleagues. Positive relationships with co-workers helped them to enjoy and remain at a workplace, even where there were other challenges. Some spoke about making good friends at work, or receiving valuable support from workmates even if supervisors were not providing this.
- **Well-run businesses:** Some of the young people spoke positively about seeing how well-run workplaces functioned, such as management and staff treating customers well, clear responsibility and accountability in the management team, and tidy and better-organised workplaces enabling employees to do their jobs successfully. They wanted to work in businesses that operated effectively so that they could fulfil their roles and learn.

*“For once at a job, I didn't feel like I needed to worry about next month or the month after, or next year, I kind of wanted to stay there. I really enjoyed the work, I was on a really big forkie, so I was having fun with that. And this was my first full time job. I did kind of see myself being there long term. Honestly, the culture there, the shifts, how they manage the workers, they gave you everything that you needed, they asked if you needed anything, they'll give you lockers, they would feed us sometimes. They put trust in the workers, and then the workers obviously reciprocate that – we're not going to break the supervisors trust. So we'll do what we need to do. It was like an out of body experience getting treated so nicely by my supervisor.” Female, 20*

## The role of supervisors

It is clear from the interviews that supervisors have an enormous impact on young peoples' experiences of work. Young people in their first job may have a poor understanding of their rights, and limited experience of what is normal to expect in a workplace. One young person pointed out that supervisors and other adults in the workplace can be important role models for young people who are just starting out at work, demonstrating healthy and professional behaviours at work.

*“Just having at least in your work a supportive adult network, even adults being kind to one another. Because that's what we see – like, if you're gonna treat everybody like shit, we're gonna treat everybody like shit.” Female, 20*

The interviews explored young peoples' experiences and perspectives on how supervisors had responded in instances when the young person had made a mistake or turned up late, or when the young person had challenging circumstances in their personal life which were affecting them at work. This included mental health challenges, chronic illness, disability, homelessness, caring responsibilities for family, and bereavement. The findings point to 3 positive supervisor behaviours that can make an enormous difference for young people. These are:

1. **Adopt a growth mindset to mistakes and learning.** Great supervisors understand that mistakes are an opportunity to learn. Young people saw great supervisors respond to mistakes in several ways:
  - a. They acknowledged that everyone makes mistakes and that young people who are just starting their working life have a lot to learn
  - b. They took the time to teach the young person how to do it correctly so they could learn
  - c. They did not make a fuss over mistakes by panicking, blaming or being abusive – but they did provide clear feedback to avoid making the mistake in the future
  - d. And they encouraged young people to take responsibility for mistakes and communicate openly and immediately when they happen – for example, saying ‘if you make a mistake, just tell me about it and it will all be fine’

*“Supervisors shouldn’t throw newbies in the deep end. I was thrown up front on the tills with no training for a seven hour shift, and the evening rush.”* **Young person, 19**

2. **Be understanding and supportive.** Great supervisors have some understanding of what support employees with a disability, mental health challenges or neurodivergence might need at work. This doesn’t mean being an expert – it means having a basic level of understanding and being willing to make practical adjustments to support employees. For example, if an employee is having a panic attack, great supervisors are able to understand what is happening and let them take a break in the staff room while it passes.
3. **Be approachable.** Great supervisors treat employees ‘like people, not numbers’ – examples from the interviews include acknowledging performance, encouraging employees to try new things and achieve targets, and checking in with employees to ask how they are going

*“All my supervisor said was – if you let me know, nothing will happen. I crashed into a whole stack of plaster board and I was so scared. Like, I pretty much damaged the whole stack. I was so scared, and then I told him and he goes, you know, “It’s fine, plaster can just get recycled and remade, it’s okay, so long as you’re not hurt, and you told us and we know, that’s fine.” I wish everybody had worked at a place with that type of environment because they were just so nice. And they understood – humans are humans, we make errors.”*

**Female, 20**

Several of the young people interviewed suggested that great supervisors strike a good balance between being flexible and keeping employees accountable:

*“If you’re sick and you need to take the day off, a good supervisor should be like, alright take the day off, but they’re also stern and not too flexible because people will try and take over that friendliness, so it’s kind of hard to find that middle area. Some employees could use that against the employer.”* **Female, 20**

*“Well, it depends on the industry. Because if it’s say, fast food, if someone’s having a bad day with depression, or something bad happened while they’re working, and they’re about to have a full on mental breakdown, let them go sit for a bit, gather their thoughts and then come back when they’re ready. But obviously, don’t do it to the point where they take advantage of it. Like have someone sit there with them and calm them down. Because I know there are*

*employees that will take advantage of that and be like, “I’m gonna have a mental breakdown,” then just go to the break room and sit on their phone and do nothing.”* **Female, 19**

Young people expect their supervisors to have the skills and authority to manage teams effectively and sensitively.

## Determination and growth

Despite the challenging experiences summarised above, the young people interviewed also shared stories of determination and growth:

- **Determination to find a job:** Some young people shared stories of actively looking for work for months and sending off dozens of job applications without getting any responses, but still being determined to keep looking despite the frustration.

*“It’s so hard to actually get a response back. Because I normally apply, send them an email as well, but I really never hear from them at all. It’s been about six or so months since I’ve last been employed, and like finding an actual person to actually reach out to me is just quite difficult and challenging. But it doesn’t pull me down at all. It’s just like, I’ve done it, you know, if it doesn’t turn out right, just move on.”* **Male, 20**

- **Taking on significant responsibility at work and at home:** Some of the young people interviewed have faced difficult circumstances or caring responsibilities while showing courage and resilience to jump into a wide range of jobs, including managing others.

*“So I was mainly helping my mum to look after my two youngest siblings, because my mum is sick and can’t move around much, and doesn’t speak much English, she’s a single parent, she needs help with appointments and stuff.”* **Female, 18**

- **Being inspired for their future career:** Some shared stories of having work experiences that inspired them to pursue a future career in that line of work – for example being a barista, cocktail bartender or construction worker.

*“Oh I want to be working on machines – twenty tonne excavators, mining, construction, anywhere where I can use big machines. It suits me, I feel comfortable using it, I’d love that job. Always gets me through the day.”* **Male, 20**

*“I can see myself enjoying bartending for the rest of my life. Like I could definitely become a manager or even sometime down the track start my own bar. Bartending’s really cool.”* **Male, 21**

- **Working and learning in well-run businesses:** Young people want to be part of businesses that are well-run. Examples given included businesses that are well-organised, providing high quality goods and services, and treating customers well. They want to feel accomplished and they want to learn.

*“I discovered my passion in hospitality. I love making coffee. I love interacting with people, communicating with them about what coffee they want. It’s really fun to hear what people want, to have their belly satisfied. For some reason I feel good when I make coffee. What I learned*



*during that time is when I make coffee, it's not about the coffee. It's about the person who makes the coffee. So that connection between the customer and staff." **Male, 21***

# A call for action

The young people interviewed were asked for their suggestions on what employers could do to improve young peoples' experiences of applying for work and workplaces. These are presented below.

## Improving the recruitment process

Young people shared **six recommendations** for employers to improve the recruitment process:

1. **Reconsider minimum experience requirements.** The most common suggestion from young people was to lower minimum experience requirements in job advertisements. Young people said that many entry-level job advertisements ask for 1-2 years of work experience, which excludes those who are looking for their first job or have limited work experience. A common statement from young people was, *"if you don't have any experience, how are you going to get it?"*

### Employers can:

- Consider how much prior experience is actually needed for an entry-level role.
- Identify opportunities and roles in your business where you can bring in young people with limited or no prior work experience.
- Be willing to help young people learn on the job.

2. **Be responsive and transparent.** Young people said that employers could communicate better during the recruitment process. Many expressed frustration with the lack of feedback or information they've received to online job applications, particularly when they are applying for a lot of jobs. This includes not receiving any acknowledgement of receipt of their application, information about recruitment process and timeframes, or feedback about their application or CV.

### Employers can:

- Notify job applicants when applications have been received and be transparent about the process and expected timeframes.
- Respond to follow up inquiries about the progress of the process.
- Provide feedback to applicants on their application if unsuccessful.

- 3. Offer in-person options during the recruitment process.** Young people suggested that employers provide the option for in-person job interviews, because they were more comfortable and felt they presented better. In-person interviews also give an opportunity to see the workplace, observe interactions between supervisors and staff, and consider whether there is a good fit with supervisors. They believed that in-person interviews also presented advantages for employers, because it gave both parties the chance to see if they're the right fit. Some young people were frustrated by fully online recruitment processes which meant that they could not approach local employers for work.

**Employers can:**

- Offer the option of in-person interviews at the workplace.
- Keep an option open for people to drop off a paper CV.

- 4. Be honest and clear in job advertisements.** Young people want job advertisements to honestly and clearly describe what the job is, what it involves, and what the requirements and conditions are. Some shared experiences of advertised requirements or conditions not accurately reflecting what was shared in a job interview, or job advertisements being difficult to understand.

**Employers can:**

- Make sure job advertisements explicitly state the pay level, expected hours per week, job requirements, and the opportunities for learning and development in the job.
- Describe what the job is and what it involves in plain English and avoid industry jargon.

- 5. Be inclusive.** Young people who are LGBTIQ+ want workplaces to help them feel that they belong. LGBTIQ+ young people can find the transition into the workforce even more challenging if workplaces are prejudiced or not welcoming. Some young people are not accepted for who they are by their own families, or others in society – this makes an inclusive work culture even more important.

**Employers can:**

- Be aware of gender diversity, and use peoples' preferred names and pronouns.
- Signal their inclusiveness so that job applicants feel welcome – for example a pride flag in the office, job advertisements that show a diverse workforce.

6. **Advertise jobs where young people will see them.** Young people said that employers should advertise jobs where young people are more likely to see them – popular social media platforms and youth organisations (like Youth Projects’ youth hubs). While most of the young people interviewed said that they apply for jobs through online platforms such as Seek, other platforms (like Instagram and TikTok) may be more likely to reach young people.

**Employers can:**

- Advertise roles for young people on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit or Twitter (X).
- Build relationships with youth organisations to reach young people and communicate with them about your business, jobs and career pathways.

## Creating great workplaces

Young people said that a great workplace is one where:

- 1. The work culture is respectful and supportive.** Young people want to feel valued as a human – “not treated like a number” – and supported in difficult circumstances – for example taking leave for sickness or bereavement or taking a short break if they have a panic attack. They want to feel respected regardless of their gender or sexual identity or race. Supervisors play an essential role by role modelling positive behaviour, being approachable, supportive, flexible, and adopt a “growth mindset” to mistakes and learning.
- 2. Employees are remunerated, and work allocated, fairly.** Young people want to be paid for the work that they have done, and in line with award wages. They want employers and supervisors to be fair and transparent in making decisions about the allocation of shifts. Hard work and high performance should be appropriately acknowledged and financially rewarded.
- 3. Employees have opportunities to learn and develop.** Young people want to see there are opportunities in a workplace for them to grow and learn at work, pick up new skills and take on new roles. Some value diversity in their roles, not just having one job to do all day, every day – for example learning how to do many different roles within a warehouse. Young people do not want to be thrown in the deep end without any training or guidance.
- 4. The business is well run.** Young people want to work in a well-run business – that is well organised and treats customers well. They want to work somewhere that takes safety seriously – safe and clean work environments, appropriate safety gear, and support to avoid injury.
- 5. Employees feel they belong.** Young people want to feel comfortable, welcome and connected to colleagues at work. They want to have the time to build relationships and have a sense of being part of a team.

# Appendix

The tables below summarise the demographic profile of research participants.

Gender		Indigenous		Disability	
Male	10 (45%)	Indigenous	3 (14%)	Disability	7 (32%)
Female	10 (45%)	Non-Indigenous	19 (86%)	Mental health condition	10 (45%)
Other or prefer not to say	2 (9%)			Neither	11 (50%)

Education / training since secondary school		Where did young people commence education / training	
None	9 (41%)	TAFE	7 (32%)
Started but didn't finish	8 (36%)	University	1 (5%)
Started and ongoing	2 (9%)	Other	4 (18%)
Completed	3 (14%)		

Current employment status		If unemployed, when last worked	
I am looking for work (and not studying)	8 (36%)	Within the past 0-6 months	7 (32%)
I am looking for work and studying	8 (36%)	Within the past 6-12 months	3 (14%)
I am working in one job	4 (18%)	Over 12 months ago	5 (23%)
I am neither working, studying or looking for work	2 (9%)	I have never worked (in a paid role)	2 (9%)

Social Ventures Australia  
Brisbane | Darwin | Melbourne | Perth | Sydney | ABN 94 100 487 572 | AFSL 428 865  
info@socialventures.com.au | socialventures.com.au | @Social\_Ventures

