

For young Canadians, a new reality: dealing with ‘job churn’

By Rachelle Younglai

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Alexander Henry, a 21-year-old film producer, is cobbling together full-time work. His media production company has a few clients, but not enough to cover all of his expenses and pay down his student loan.

Mr. Henry, who recently graduated from Toronto’s Humber College, knows that he has to be ready to adapt to the rapidly changing labour market and said his mom has drilled it into him that no job is secure.

“You can have a job but you can lose that job any second,” he said.

Mr. Henry is part of a large swath of Canadians who expect to have numerous jobs over the course of his career.

He is one of the workers Finance Minister Bill Morneau alluded to when he told Canada’s youth to get used to “job churn” – jumping from “job to job to job.”

The comments angered some young workers, who booed Prime Minister Justin Trudeau when he attended a labour forum this week.

“We are told to go to school. We go to school and get our degrees ... and then we have to go from job to job to job,” said Carly Sonier, who works as a food processor at Post Foods Canada in Niagara Falls and represents younger workers for the Canadian Labour Congress union federation.

Ms. Sonier said lots of young adults are working multiple contract or part-time positions and are looking for better wages, a steady schedule and paid sick days.

Those job features were more common when the baby boomers were growing up. Today’s labour market is more transient, and temporary work is on the rise.

Among young workers, one-third worked in seasonal jobs, contract or casual positions last year, compared with 25 per cent in 1997, according to Statistics Canada.

One youth employment agency tells young workers that they should expect to change jobs frequently and retool as they go.

“The economy is changing so quickly. Jobs come and go and they have to be ready to adapt,” said Timothy Lang, president of YES youth employment services.

The unemployment rate for young workers has always been higher than the national average. The latest data show the youth jobless rate at about 13 per cent, nearly double the national level. The labour participation rate for youth is 63 per cent, compared with nearly 90 per cent for prime working age employees.

The lack of adequately paid employment is one reason more young adults live with their parents. More than 40 per cent of adults between the ages of 20 and 29 lived with their parents in 2011 compared with 27 per cent three decades ago, according to Statscan’s most recent data.

Andrew Leyland says he’s discouraged about his employment prospects. The 28-year-old master’s student works two contract jobs to pay the rent on a place that he shares with a roommate. He is worried that when he graduates he will not be able to secure well-paid work in his field of health policy.

“I am less optimistic about the possibility of finding a gainful job within B.C.’s job market after completing my master’s degree,” he said.

Among prime-working-age Canadians, 10 per cent had temporary employment last year versus 8 per cent two decades ago.

Mr. Leyland, a student at University of British Columbia's School of Population and Public Health, said his current contract jobs have to be renewed and are "not at the level of income that I could sustain myself."

Some graduates are forced to work for no pay to gain experience. According to the Canadian Intern Association, there are 300,000 unpaid interns across the country – one symptom of the state of the labour market.

"There are less and less well-paid, meaningful entry-level jobs available for youth. What is available instead are minimum wage, low-paid jobs," said Richa Sandill, advocacy director for the Canadian Intern Association. "If you do want to stay connected to your field and gain experience, you're then told to take on unpaid internships."

Ms. Sandill, who has worked paid and unpaid internships, said the government needs to strengthen the country's labour laws and ban the use of unpaid interns. She said she recently discovered the federal government also hires unpaid interns and expressed frustration with Mr. Morneau's comments.

"These comments are indicative of the attitude towards millennial workers today, indicating

that it's our problem while it should be the federal government taking the lead on this. Why is this something we should get used to?" she asked.

Mr. Morneau said his government is looking at how to train and retrain people as they change jobs.

After Mr. Henry graduated earlier this year, he applied for 80 to 100 jobs in the film industry but did not hear back.

He was about to start looking for work outside his field when he started to get clients for the production company he started at school. Now Mr. Henry is getting ready to move to downtown Toronto after commuting between his parents' house in Stouffville, Ont., and his girlfriend's place in west Toronto.

Although his company – Alfredo Films – is off to a good start, Mr. Henry said he is worried about the future.

"It is a little bit scary at the same time. You can't lock anything down. When I get to a stage where I get married, have kids, that is terrifying, because you want to reassure your kids that things will be okay. So when things are always changing, it is very stressful, it is terrifying," he said. "The reality is that you don't know what will happen the next day. That is life."