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THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2022

Entering the Entry-level Job Market in 2022

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Introduction

I belong to the Class of 2020. 2020 was the Chinese Year of Rat, which traditionally marks a year brimming with wealth and surplus. But what I and billions of others got were disease, distress, and deaths. Fresh graduates like me who couldn't find employment anywhere because businesses were either downsizing or shutting down altogether. While we can't blame the employers for not recruiting during a depression, we also can't afford to ignore the vulnerable position of entry-level job seekers. No doubt that the pandemic made it abnormally difficult to find a job in the first place, but the category that's been bearing the brunt of "jobs are hard to come by" since a couple of years now is that of the youth.

"The Ideal Candidate":

It's no longer unusual to come across social media posts exaggerating and to an extent, almost 'faking' a good and successful life.

A life so enviable and so perfect that you develop an instant and incurable FOMO (fear of missing out). Other than funny memes, branded clothes, and lavish lunches, what's flooding the internet these days are raging posts of high schoolers bagging topnotch internships, college freshmen giving investment advice, and people, in general, romanticising the idea of overplay, overwork, & overtime. Almost everyone is an entrepreneur, an innovator, or a visionary who is self-motivated, excellent in crisis management, and loves problem solving. The question here is – are young people now toffee-nosed braggarts who love to play up their own accomplishments or has the present system 'engineered' them into idealising the idea of 'being ideal' since a very young age?

When “The Minimum” is Too Much, Too Soon:

Let’s take the example of the entry-level job market to understand this. In recent years, the job market has witnessed a rather peculiar phenomenon – employers are seeking a minimum of 1-3 years of experience for even entry-level jobs. An analysis of the LinkedIn job listings between December 2017 and August 2021 concludes the following: 60.3% of the entry level positions in software and IT industry, 50.0% of the entry level positions in manufacturing, 47% of the entry level positions in design, 45% of the entry level positions in education, and 43% of the entry level positions in finance ask for 3+ years of experience. (Anders, 2021) Spelled out simply, even jobs, that were originally meant to help one enter an industry and ‘learn’ the basics to kickstart his/her career, now necessitate that “in addition to” having spent years and thousands of dollars on getting a “reasonably distinctive degree”, a young person must also have gained the know-how of the industry “while still outside of the industry”. In the wake of such unrealistically high expectations of employers, can we even blame young job seekers for boasting of and gloating over their own big and small victories?

Turning a Blind Eye to Disadvantages & Diversity:

More importantly, such eligibility requirements shift the onus of both ‘affording’ the process of acquisition of skills and ‘acquiring’ the skills per se onto the jobseekers, thus, creating & perpetuating uneven playing grounds for candidates. It becomes a vicious circle, where no matter where you start, you’ll still be stuck in the very first hurdle.

Employers, who are now looking for something more than just ‘motivated and hard-working 20-something quick-learners looking for a job’, argue that it’s not all that difficult to “gain experience” after all because some of the more ‘convenient’ ways of doing so are interning at XYZ companies and winning a couple of inter/national competitions, thus, showing evidence of practical knowledge and outstanding networking skills. But this leads us to yet another question: is it correct to ‘assume’ that there exists a universal and thus, equitable system where everyone has the ‘privilege’ of being able to secure an internship? For example, students living in remote areas may not be able to afford to travel to and stay in a metropolitan city for the sake of an internship. Their socio-economic status, thus, puts them at a significant disadvantage. As elitism pervades into the sphere of job acquisition (which is per se, meant to be a mechanism for the socio-economic mainstreaming), being socio-economically disadvantaged becomes an individual, and not a social, issue, which, therefore, must be taken care of at the personal level, making it easier for employers and institutions to evade their responsibilities.

The Irony of Opportunity:

While insisting on extensive prior experience does speed up the training cycle (resulting in goal realisation much earlier than scheduled), this “harvest-from-others” approach (fallaciously and almost ironically) assumes that there exist a host of employers who are willing to hire and train newly-minted graduates (while they themselves refuse to do so). (Anders, 2021)

Interns Versus Job Market Entrants:

Then there's the case of un/underpaid internships. While employers view internships as a cost-effective method of getting the same amount of work done while saving a lot of money, it badly affects both the interns and the prospective jobseekers. While interns remain un/underpaid, which is strictly against the principles of dignity of labor, prospective job market entrants find it difficult to find a job opening since their work by then is shouldered by interns. (Morgan, 2021)

Let's Complicate this even more!:

In other cases, job postings attach the "entry level" label to positions that are downright mid-career in their complexity, thus, strategically eliminating 'the entry and/or sustenance' of freshers. (Anders, 2021)

Automation:

Moreover, many of the jobs which would have been advertised as entry-level a decade or two back have vanished due to automation. But such a takeover by technology has left young people fighting over fewer and fewer career-launching jobs because junior positions are the easiest to replace. (Gale, 2021) (Vuleta, 2021) this has caused disruption in the labor market where work that once required multiple freshers can now be done by one person in a fraction of seconds, that is, a lot more can be done with a lot less. For example, data processing, which used to be a time-consuming and strenuous job, can now be done in a couple of minutes with the help of a range of softwares. And good economics tells us that we must minimise cost and maximise output, which is exactly what automation is doing. We've optimised so much that while we've made our work simpler and output generation faster, we've mercilessly killed millions of entry-level jobs. And the roles that are now left are barely something that employers can trust a fresh graduate with, preventing the entry and/or upward mobility of a generation of young jobseekers/workers.

All of these sum up to create an unimaginably challenging entry-level job market. And the inability to land a solid role at the beginning of one's career or a significant gap between one's date of graduation and date of their first job can impact their career in a major way, for a long time. (Morgan, 2021) And if such trend persists, it is likely to create involuntary unemployment or underemployment in the long term.

So, what are the young job market entrants doing then?

The very obvious repercussion is that those, who have no choice but to enter the job market, take a lower-than-average wage, which later diminishes their long-term earnings potential. Moreover, this delayed financial independence may lead young adults to become increasingly reliant on their parents and further adversely affect their long-term earnings, student loan payments, and materialist milestones like home or car ownership. (Nguyen, 2020) OECD (2020) estimates say that households with heads aged 35 or younger hold less financial and non-financial assets than households headed by older people, making this group more vulnerable to face financial insecurity, in particular when coupled with lower educational attainment. Further, OECD evidence demonstrates that when poverty at a young age persists, it compounds with disadvantages in health, education, employment, and earnings, and can result in higher welfare dependency. And then, there are those who, being hopeful that an additional degree would grant them an edge in next year's recovering job market and a potential salary boost – apply to graduate programs (similar to the surge of grad school applicants in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis). David Grusky, Director of Stanford University's Center for Poverty and Inequality, said that this would mean that students are more likely to take on more loans, only to re-enter a compromised labor market (where even paying off their debts would become harder and harder). (Nguyen, 2020)

The Snowball Effect:

Thus, what decision-makers do today will not only affect the young labor force now but will also snowball into creating significant stumbling blocks for the generations next. Given that the world at large has agreed to cooperate to help achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goal number 8 (decent work and economic growth), it's important to work towards a paradigm shift where employers understand that a more liberal entry-level hiring policy now will reap significant rewards in terms of intergenerational fairness now and later. If today's generation of young job seekers is "saved" from becoming un/under-employed, we'll be able to construct a society where the present older generation will no longer have to compromise on their priorities to feed their un/under-employed "adult children", where young adults will no longer have to depend on their elderly parents for their day-to-day expenses and will rather be able to afford care services for the ageing generation, and where young adults will also be able to invest in their children (through nutrition, health care, quality education, skill development, and so on) which will not only aid the processes of social reproduction of labor and human capital formation (over generations) but will also manufacture a welfare society that sustains on the framework of inclusive economic growth.

The New Intergenerational Contract:

Therefore, what must now be incorporated into the new intergenerational contract is that entry-level workers are actually not at the bottom of the totem pole of the workforce; they're in fact the very foundation, the building block of the workforce now and the society next. If we don't invest in them now, we'll condemn ourselves to several generations of inequality, poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment, all of which are in strict contradiction of the world we envision and aspire to live in.

Entry-level workers, therefore, must be treated as 'partners', who must be respected and whose basic needs must be taken care of.

University-Industry Linkages:

One of the ways to ease this process would be to start University-Industry Linkages (UILs). Such a synergy shall act as a mediator and modulator of skill development, and help in strengthening of R&D, and promotion of entrepreneurship. Companies should reach out to colleges to figure out what their current candidates are learning, and then help align the curriculum to their entry-level hiring needs. This way, entry level candidates will have the skills that employers demand. (Gale, 2021)

Call for Compassion:

But more than anything else, employers must remain aware of and compassionate about diversity and inclusion -- that not every candidate comes from similar backgrounds, has had access to similar resources, and will, thus, be able to perform at similar levels must be kept in mind. While it's absolutely reasonable to focus on faster generation of output, it is equally important to not paralyse a significant section of the labor force in the meanwhile. Better hiring practices must cluster around broadening the definition of "who is an ideal candidate" and refocus the hiring lenses onto an individual's soft skills (like leadership, innovation, problem solving, and flexibility) and potential, rather than just the number of years of prior experience or the list of technical skills on their CVs. (Gale, 2021)

Employers now must remember that they too were new entrants to the job market once. Would they've been able to come so far as to hire and fire young entrants today if their employer had refused to believe in their young blood then?

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