

Workforce Skill Development In Camps

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For many young people, serving as a summer camp staff member can be an entry point into the labor market as well as a valuable job skill-building experience. These camp staff

jobs can vary widely by title and expectations but often have one thing in common- the young staff member is often responsible for the safety and well-being of younger children often in their care 24 hours a day for weeks at a time. At a time when employers express concern regarding the workplace readiness of the emerging workforce (Jackson, 2010), camp-based employment, which includes a wide range of positions filled by adolescents and emerging adults every summer, is a largely unrecognized context for effective workforce development.

A body of research recently has emerged focused on workforce skills needed for the 21st century. Findings from a 2006 study of over 400 employers identified the following list of the most important 21st century skills individuals should possess in the emerging workforce: professionalism/work ethic, oral and written communications, teamwork/collaboration, and critical thinking/problem solving (Casner-Lotto, Barrington, & Wright, 2006). In addition, applied skills were more valued than basic knowledge. Based upon these criteria and the employers' ratings of the emerging workforce, high school and college graduates all received primarily insufficient scores across the identified skill categories. Emerging adults themselves also appear to recognize these deficiencies as evidenced by results from a nationwide survey of high school graduates (Peter D. Hart Research Associates & Public Opinion Strategies, 2005). According to the survey, 46% of high school graduates currently in the workforce and 39% currently in college reported feeling a gap existed between what they learned in school and what was expected of them to enter the workforce. Given these studies, it appears that a gap exists between the skills youth need to successfully enter the workforce and the skills they possess upon graduation from high school and college.

Research Says

- Age-appropriate jobs with positive adult mentoring and opportunities to learn new skills can benefit academic achievement (Staff & Schulenberg, 2010).

- A positive relationship exists between youth employment and subsequent labor market experiences (Bronte-Tinkew & Redd, 2001).
- A wide range of evidence suggests that adolescents who acquire more work experience earn higher wages in subsequent years (Pergamit, 1995).
- Recent adolescent employment research indicates that youth from single parent families are less likely to engage in underage drinking if they are employed (Rocheleau & Swisher, 2012).
- Adolescent employment has also been linked with a variety of negative outcomes such as underage drinking (Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993; Mortimer, Finch, Ryu, Shanahan, & Call, 1996) and lower GPAs for adolescents who worked more than 20 hours a week (Staff & Schulenberg, 2010).

Camp and Workforce Development

- Working at camp fostered team work, initiative, identity, and interpersonal relationship skills (Ferrari & McNeely, 2007).
- Personal changes such as increased confidence and skills, a sense of belonging, and the ability to solve problems occurred during the time staff members worked at camp. (Garst, Franz, Baughman, Smith, & Peters, 2009).
- Camp as context for identity development is one of the most commonly identified outcomes of the camp experience for both campers (Duerden, Widmer, Taniguchi, & McCoy, 2009) and staff.
- The opportunity to serve as a role model at camp provided a means for staff to explore and develop new self-identities (Johnson, Goldman, Garey, Britner, & Weaver, 2011). For many staff, camp is a safe haven, a place to explore their identity away from shame and judgment they may encounter elsewhere.
- Other positive benefits of camp employment may include positive relationships, appreciation of diversity, teamwork, group cohesion, personal growth, leadership and responsibilities, acquisition of technical skills, service as a role model, interpersonal skills, and administrative skills (Bialeschki, Dahowski and Henderson, 1998).
- Developing camp relationships, experiencing camp culture, successfully overcoming work challenges, focusing on children, leading a simple life style, and having a safe work environment promoted positive staff development (Garst et al., 2009).

- Negative aspects of the camp staff experience included “burnout” due to daily hassles (i.e., homesick camper, physical exhaustion). (Paisley & Powell, 2007), low wages, and minimal time alone (Bialeschki et al., 1998). While other youth employment settings may also produce similar feelings of employee exhaustion, residential camps are unique for the 24/7 nature of many camp staff positions.

Bottom Line

Camp employment offers the types of experiences that allow for the positioning of camp as an effective workforce development context. Not all camps will necessarily provide equal opportunities for workforce development, so special attention should be paid to camp factors that facilitate or hinder positive employee growth. Practices that camp administrators can apply immediately include clearly communicating expectations and providing feedback to staff, structuring schedules to provide adequate downtime for staff, and assuring the participant to staff ratios remain reasonably in check. As suggested by the research findings, the camp context seems to be an effective site for developing employment skills needed by 21st century workers.

Resources

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