



Peel Region's Summer Job Challenge

Youth unemployment: meeting the challenge

In 2009, the Regional Municipality of Peel recorded the highest youth summer unemployment rate in the country (19.6 percent). Municipal leaders were concerned about 'scarring' – the impacts that early failure to secure employment can have on long-term employability, career income and health. At a 2009 Job Summit, Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion issued a challenge to employers to expand their summer youth hiring programs just a little bit more.

Peel Region Human Services Commissioner Janet Menard agreed that the Region could indeed make more room for youth. In May 2010, Council doubled Janet's initial recommendation; instead of hiring 30 youth to participate in a Summer Job Challenge pilot project, 60 positions would be funded. Human Services would pay \$230,000 for participant salaries and direct the initiative. The new venture would complement the Region's regular May to September summer student opportunities program. Designed for post-secondary students, its salaries are paid by participating departments.

Janet's four fellow Commissioners recognized that the Challenge would give them an opportunity to address long outstanding projects and add value to existing community work. The five departments created 61 new job opportunities and agreed to budget the necessary supervisory time.

"It was a tight turnaround," says Employment Services Manager Sandra Welch. "In less than one month, we worked with departmental supervisors to create job descriptions that fell into three categories – administration, service and labour. We opened up applications channels using our Ontario Works and community partner connections and, within three days, had received 504 applications."

The Challenge positions were established to offer opportunities for youth who had not been successful in early job searches, including individuals from low-income neighbourhoods and families.

Peel Region lies along the inner ring of the Greater Toronto Area's golden horseshoe and includes Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon. More affordable housing, access to 400-series highways and Pearson Airport, and a young and growing population (1,159,405) have made Peel Region the second largest municipality in Ontario after Toronto. The Regional government is exploring new ways to build leadership, partnership and community resilience.

Employment Services Supervisor Ilona Vartolas was tasked with coordinating the Summer Job Challenge. The interview process was structured to surface applicants’ interests and aptitudes and – where possible – job assignments were matched with areas of study. The process worked well. Of the 61 youth hired that first summer, 60 completed all eight weeks of the placement (the 61st finished after seven weeks).

“One of our best program design decisions was to assign one person as the go-to regional representative on the project,” says Ilona. “Employers and employees felt secure in knowing that they could call me any time and get an immediate response for any concerns they had.”

Satisfied managers, appreciative youth

The Summer Job Challenge was so well received by managers and youth that the Region chose to fund a second Challenge in 2011. As a way to expand the program to support the community, a list was compiled of partner agencies that could meet the necessary supervisory and health and safety requirements. In the end, six agencies chose to participate, hosting 27 of the 75 placements.

That year, 954 applications were received in four days. Completion rates were again almost 100 percent – 74 of 75 youth finished the eight-week placements. As in 2010, managers gave enthusiastic reports of the work done and the energy and creativity demonstrated by their youthful employees; 100 percent of managers reported wanting to hire through this program in the future.

The Challenge allowed the Region and its partners the opportunity to take on new projects or complete unfinished ones. But its ultimate goal was to offer youth the chance to have a successful work experience while receiving support and mentorship.

A one-day orientation session covered basic health and safety and accessibility information. The new hires were congratulated on securing their positions and encouraged to make the most of the opportunity. Over the eight-week placements, supervisors met regularly with their young employees, giving them feedback and suggestions for improving their job performance. To consolidate and extend the investment made in each participant, a two-day wrap up and celebration event was held at the end of the summer. It offered encouragement and practical help on future job search and career development opportunities.

Peel Region Summer Job Challenge statistics*

	2010	2011	
youth hired	61	75	* The Region’s regular summer student hiring practices provide a four-month work experience for approximately 450 individuals each year.
hourly pay rates (8 weeks)	\$10.25	\$10.25	
placement retention	98%	99%	

Community organizations that participated in the 2011 Summer Job Challenge:



The Challenge gives youth a glimpse of their future work lives and they like what they see. Yolanda Gwanzura was hired in 2010 in an administrative position at the Region. Says Yolanda: “On the very first day of work, my supervisor spent time talking to me about our section, how it fit into the Regional structure and plans for its future. I became part of a really great team.” She changed both her educational path (from social work to political science) and career focus (from front-line social work to an interest in policy) as a result of her Challenge experience. Yolanda returned for a four-month placement in 2011, applying through the Region’s regular summer student hiring channels.



First day orientation



Youth and supervisors celebrate their successes

Chenelle Douglas’ 2011 Challenge placement was with Knights Table – a community organization that serves families facing hunger, poverty and homelessness. Already planning to continue studies in social work, she came away even more inspired to enter her chosen field. Says Chenelle: “I was hired as a special events coordinator and organized two big events – a barbecue and carwash fundraiser and a volunteer appreciation gala.” Not only did Chenelle’s fundraiser triple the highest amount previously raised by the event, she was assigned numerous additional tasks, including writing reports, making presentations and conducting orientation sessions for new volunteers.

Plans for the future

The Summer Job Challenge is now a line item in the Region’s budget, demonstrating its continued commitment to investing in its youth. This summer’s intake of 75 participants will be assigned one of 48 regional or 27 community partner positions.

Peel Region’s response to Mayor McCallion’s call to action has already had a positive impact on the lives of 136 young people. Imagine the possibilities if each medium- to large-sized employer in the country extended their summer hiring practices just a little further. Yolanda and Chenelle’s counsel to would-be Challenge applicants applies equally well to employers: “You have nothing to lose, all to gain, so give it your best shot.”

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