

Career paths: showcasing the alternatives

Jess Yeung and **Cheney Cheng**, conveners of HKFYG's think tank "Youth I.D.E.A.S." on Employment & Economic Development, comment on the vocational routes to career advancement. They say stakeholders should work together to create clear pathways.

"Making vocational education more desirable is not just about changing its name or giving it

better packaging, it is about showcasing the ways in which it provides a credible alternative route to an academic education."

Jess Yeung, founder of GinZeng and Deputy Manager of Tai Lai Ginseng Hong Ltd, writes about the skills he looks for in recruits to the ginseng industry and how traditional businesses might attract more young employees if they were demystified.

As an entrepreneurial employer, I always look for work ethic first when I recruit: willingness to take responsibility and integrity. I think the majority of the skills I am looking for have to be learnt outside the classroom but I also look for people skills and learning skills. Schools in Hong Kong do an excellent job of producing studious students but most of them do little to prepare students for the labour market.

For my startup, GinZeng, we are looking for someone versatile and flexible. Someone who can sell, who knows about marketing, and doesn't mind doing some manual labour. Such a person will be exposed to a wide spectrum of tasks from low-level deliveries to high-level meetings and closing deals with buyers. The VTC offers a wide range of courses including sales and marketing and, contrary to what most people think, there are plenty that are neither connected with manual labour nor highly technical, but there is nothing as far as I am aware suitable for the ginseng industry.

I think apprenticeship is probably the most appropriate form of training as a lot of skills have to be learnt from actual experience. My father became an apprentice more than 30 years ago, slowly picking up knowledge and know-how from masters in his trade before starting his own company. Such a tradition of apprenticeship is certainly fading as young people are no longer willing to join the industry. I guess the only way to maintain it is to renew and demystify the industry. Personally, I am very excited about what I am doing. There is so much scope for me to innovate and develop my company and I feel very fortunate to be able to build on my dad's legacy.

Nevertheless, right now there are no young recruits in my family's business. Most new people we hire quit in less than a month and the majority of our employees have worked for the company for more than 20 years. However, people in traditional industries tend to be very traditional themselves which results in inertia and resistance to innovation. There are so many new technologies that can help companies to be much more efficient, and young people are more likely to embrace them. However, recently I hired a middle-aged lady who had no tertiary education but had worked for other SMEs for a long time. She is now the company secretary and she is perfect!

There is a very high demand for skilled labour in many of the industries that make up our economy. I think they should all complete the Specification of Competency Standards (SCS) under the Qualification Framework as soon as possible. The SCS differentiate the various levels of skill and competency required and provide guidance for employees, showing them how to move up the career ladder. With the cooperation of all stakeholders career prospects can be clearly illustrated and students participating in vocational education and training would benefit.

Making vocational education more desirable is not just about changing its name or giving it better packaging. It is about showcasing the ways in which it provides a credible alternative route to an academic education. Such clear pathways, in many cases, are not offered by a traditional academic education in the arts or sciences.

“Employers should subsidize vocational training regardless of employees’ age.”

Cheney Cheng, co-founder of DotKids and Teach4HK, thinks that education and training for the workplace comes from a combination of learning how to work with other people, learning independently and learning from specialists.

I think that employers should subsidize vocational training for promising employees. It is an effective way to maintain high-quality work and the morale of employees regardless of their age. In such cases, I would consider it fair for the employee to commit to staying with the organization for a certain period of time, at least two years.

On-the-job training is effective and quick whereas theoretical training is transformative, but making time for it can be difficult if you are busy. I would also say that for roughly 20% of your time, or one day in the working week, you should be free to work on whatever you want as long as it contributes to your personal development as well that of the organization you work for. It could be working on a project or studying relevant theory.

There needs to be a tangible career path leading on from vocational education. Young people need hope and a future with growth. At least there has to be evidence that they can earn a decent living, and perhaps be able to afford their own home one day if they work hard and follow a specific vocational direction.

Youth I.D.E.A.S. (Ideals Dedication Engagement Aspirations Service) is a think tank to which Jess Yeung and Cheney Cheng belong. It was established by HKFYG's Youth Research Centre earlier this year and its first report was on vocational training.

Youth Research Centre

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