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## WHAT'S KEEPING TEENS OUT OF WORK

By Lauren Weber  
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It's rough out there for teenagers who want to work.

The unemployment rate for American teens – which counts young people who are available to work and looked for jobs in the prior four weeks – was 17.5% last month.

While it could be that employers view teens as less dependable than adults, workforce experts say the pre-employment tests required of applicants for a vast number of low-skill jobs have become a big obstacle for teens.

Two years ago Commonwealth Corporation, a workforce-development agency in Massachusetts, studied why youth employment rates had fallen sharply in that state. Pre-hire assessments were a significant and surprising obstacle, said Nancy Snyder, the group's president.

Young job seekers, Commonwealth found, seemed not to realize the test results had any bearing on hiring decisions. "Online applications are a major barrier to hiring for teens, in particular, they are not well prepared or coached about the personality testing that is imbedded in the application process," the group's report concluded.

Teens don't understand that employers are looking for things like consistent answers and signs they will fit the company's culture, said Snyder. Their "approach to the screening tool was much more casual than it should have been."

If they understood that they were completing a personality test, she added, they would be more thoughtful and meticulous about their responses, which she described as necessary in order to score high enough to be offered an interview.

A front-page story in Monday's Journal examines the expanded use of assessments to appraise everything from communication skills to work habits to whether a candidate is a good match with a company's culture.

Commonwealth's researchers spoke to nearly 200 employers and 30 teenagers. "Almost every employer was doing some form of testing," Snyder said. And the young job seekers appeared to be doing poorly on the tests, which measure traits like dependability and honesty, according to Commonwealth's report, which was authored with the Center for Labor Markets & Policy at Drexel University.

"It is in fact these behavioral traits, coupled with poor job seeking skills that drive employer decisions about whether or not to hire a teen," the report said.

Such soft skills, as they are also known, are usually developed through job experience, creating a Catch-22 for young would-be workers, said Alicia Sasser Modestino, an economist at Northeastern University who studies hiring practices.

"The old adage goes, 'You can't get a job without experience and you can't get experience without a job,' and that has even bigger implications now," she said.

As the Journal story notes, pre-hire assessments are helping employers find the people they want. But the prevalence of testing can hurt young people trying to get a foothold in the workforce.

Yet companies aren't describing the application procedures in a way that teens can understand what's expected of them. Researchers at Commonwealth visited a number of online job applications and ran the text through a software program that evaluates language complexity. Most instructions for completing the applications were written at a 14th grade level, they found. "In some cases, the application page is so complex that it's hard for people to understand what it is they're supposed to do," Snyder said.

Another problem, she added: applicants typically do not receive feedback after a pre-hire test, so they are unaware of where they fall short.

The tests would be useful, Snyder said, if assessment vendors or employers shared their data with workforce development experts, who could then design relevant training programs for workers.

"Is it that they don't have strong work behaviors, or they don't understand customer service?" Snyder said. "As labor markets tighten, it would be interesting to understand why they're screening people out. If it's that young people don't understand customer service, you can train people around that."

Partly based on the report, entitled "Signaling Success: Boosting Teen Employment Prospects," Commonwealth is piloting a training program to help young people navigate current hiring process. It includes coaching on how to complete pre-hire assessments.