

Profession versus job: Working in the USA

In his eighth report from the USA, Robert Egloff goes into the fundamental differences that exist between the American and Swiss job markets. He also deals with the fact that the treatment of up-and-coming employees and also the general attitude towards work are completely different in the two countries.

Out of every 100 Swiss students who have completed their schooling, almost three quarters (approx. 73%) have an apprenticeship certification by age 20. At about age 16, then, Swiss youth begin to work and learn in their chosen professional field.¹ In 1993 in the USA, a total of 5 million (approx. 48%) of 16 to 19 year olds worked as salespeople, office workers, day laborers, and in various other service-oriented jobs. A little more than 3 million of these were part-time jobs, the rest of course being full-time.² At first glance, there doesn't seem to be such a huge difference. Nevertheless, the contrast could not, in fact, be any larger.

What is different here?

Swiss youth grow up in an environment in which a great number of the people around them did an apprenticeship; career-building apprenticeships are simply a part of the culture. Between the ages of 14 and 16, young people go through an active career selection process, which leads to a conscious, if not definite, career choice. The choice made, they then begin their career training, which, as

mentioned above, combines learning in school with learning on the job as much as possible.

It's completely different here in the United States. None of the elements upon which the Swiss system is based exist here. The only reason a teenager seeks a job is to earn money. This money is then used to help finance an education that is still considered the only way to happiness here. Or, it is used to care for a family, since the USA is, after all, the nation with the highest percentage of teenagers with children of all industrialized countries. Or, these wages go toward gas and insurance for a car, the thing that promises and provides the ultimate freedom. Jobs, therefore, have nothing to do with what is learned in school; they are purely a source of spending money.

What are the advantages of the worksite learning? I see three major benefits for young people: 1) entrance into the adult world (socialization), 2) learning the rules of the working world, such as punctuality, responsibility, self-reliance, teamwork, etc. and 3) the development of career-specific abilities and skills. These advantages would appear to make the differences between the U.S. and the Swiss educational systems almost insignificant. In both cases most young people would benefit in the first two ways I've mentioned. I believe, however, that it's exactly the third

element that makes the difference, for it leads to pride in one's career, the establishment of career ethics, and even eventually to the mastery of one's craft.

How do I come to this conclusion? To answer this, we must look closely at the activities and jobs that occupy young people on this side of the Atlantic. American teenagers enter what can only be described as the „secondary labor market.“ This often-used and loosely-defined term describes all entry-level positions of the job market. Secondary labor market jobs are usually part-time and pay minimum wage (\$4.25/hour at the time this was written). They are further characterized by high turnover, limited training, low skill requirements, routinization, and high „exchangibility“- the assumption that one worker is as good as (and could be easily replaced by) any other. Most provide no benefits and have little room for advancement.³

Adolescents compete with older job seekers in this secondary market and, what's worse, continue to do so until age 27 or 28.

¹ "Educational labyrinth Switzerland: who ends up where?", Federal office for Statistics

² U.S. Department of labor, Washington, D.C., office of labor Statistics, February 1994, Employment and Earnings

³ U.S. Department of labor, Employment and training administration, 1995, Skills, standards and Entry-Level Work

These jobs are rarely relevant to a career or career field, and they generally do not provide a strong financial basis for the worker, and certainly not for a worker with a family.

Swiss youth must decide consciously on a career or career path, and whether or not this process occurs too soon for some is debatable. The majority of American adolescents who do not take part in the fairly direct path to an academically-based career, such as doctor or lawyer, never choose at all; the career chooses them; and in most cases pretty late in life. For the national economy, employers, and most employees, it's actually too late.

Summer jobs

The three month long summer vacation in the USA has allowed a „summer job culture“ to develop. Most attempts at moving away from this once agriculturally-based school calendar have failed; the Americans love their long summer break. The long months of June, July, and August kind of force adolescents to find jobs. Again, very few expect to turn this work into a real career later on. The main reason why companies participate in the summer job game is to keep young people off the streets. And also to boost their image with the general population. Only in the rarest cases is it actually about developing a future workforce.

Here in Austin, like in other regions of the country, we've begun connecting these summer jobs to so-called „Career Pathways.“ That means that only students who

have already taken certain high school courses are eligible for certain internships. This preparation naturally increases the companies' interest in hiring young people. This is because, first of all, they get adolescent workers who are better motivated, clearly interested in the relevant career field, and who also already have some basic knowledge from what they learned in school. Secondly, the opportunity arises to give these young people access early on to possible careers in the firm.

Last year we developed a table which showed the differences between various kind of summer jobs (see Table 1) to help applicants, as well as firms, with the selection process. Even here most young people held jobs that fell into the „summer job“ category; barely 80 fit into one of the other two categories.

The Child Labor Law

Last summer, an employer here was reprimanded for having a 17 year old student on the payroll. This caused us to take a closer look at the Child Labor Law. It seems that this law also operates on the assumption that since adolescents must go to high school full-time until they turn 18, they shouldn't be spending their time at a workplace. The reality of things in the USA is not at all compatible with this law, however; a fact that those who officiate it seem to miss.

The law identifies 17 so-called Hazardous Occupations Orders, which are forbidden for those under 18 to practice. (see Table 2)⁴ What

the public doesn't know is that exceptions are made to the regulations if the activity is necessary for educational purposes and if it is in the context of a planned and registered apprenticeship, which must be both short-term and directly and constantly supervised by an expert in the field. Employers are concerned more than anything about liability, and, unfortunately, their insurance companies often don't know about the exceptions. But because of these exceptions, the employer I mentioned above thankfully was absolved of any wrongdoing.

It's exactly the same way with the minimum wage laws, to which there are also many unknown exceptions for apprentices. This is another great stumbling block to the establishment of an effective workforce development program in this country. The fact that apprentices here are required from the beginning to earn just as much as an adult employee doesn't exactly entice business to participate in an apprenticeship system.

Someone said to me a few weeks ago that he wouldn't like it if young people here had to decide so early on a career, as they must in Switzerland. He said one's time in school, and especially in college, should be spent having „fun.“ How long can this country afford this luxury?

⁴ 4 U.S. Department of labor, Hazardous Occupation Orders

Table 2:

Hazardous Occupations Orders

- HO1 Manufacturing and storing explosives
- HO2 Motor-vehicle driving and outside helper, including driving motor vehicles, working as outside helpers on motor vehicles, or driving as a part of any occupation
- HO3 Coal mining
- HO4 Logging and sawmilling
- HO5* Work using power-driven woodworking machines, including the use of saws on construction sites
- HO6 Work where exposed to radioactive substances
- HO7 Work involving the operation of power-driven hoisting devices, including the use of fork lifts, cranes and nonautomatic elevators
- HO8* Work using power-driven metal forming, punching, and shearing machines (but HO8 permits the use of a large group of machine tools used on metal, including lathes, turning machines, milling machines, grinding, boring machines, and planing machines)
- HO9 All mining other than coal mining, including work at gravel pits
- HO10* Work involving slaughtering or meat-packing, processing, or rendering, including the operation of power driven-metal slicers in retail stores
- HO11 Work involving the operation of power-driven bakery machines
- HO12* Work using power-driven paper-products machines, including the operation and loading of paper balers in grocery stores
- HO13 Work in manufacturing of brick, tile and kindred products
- HO14* Work involving the use of circular saws, band saws, and guillotine shears
- HO15 All work involving wrecking, demolition and ship-breaking
- HO16* All work in roofing operations
- HO17* All work in excavating, including work in a trench as a plumber

* Hazardous Occupation Orders with Exemptions Applicable to Minors & Training