

By Alex Christian 12th January 2023



Some employers look to hire and continually turn over junior employees – sometimes harming young workers’ careers before they’ve even begun.

Sarah had always dreamed of working in the fashion industry. Aged 21, she decided to follow her dream, move to London and find a career she loved. “Like many young people, my passion was fashion,” she says. “But the reality wasn’t quite so glamorous.”

After working for less than a year in fashion retail, Sarah secured an e-commerce assistant role in the head office of a global luxury brand. In both jobs, she was surrounded by like-minded twenty-somethings, all of whom wanted to succeed in the fashion world. “It’s like any creative industry: young people always see it as cool to work in,” she says. “And the perks are great, even in sales: we’d get heavily discounted items all the time.”

However, Sarah adds that there was always a high office turnover – particularly among low-level staff. “Young employees would quit all the time: an 18-year-old intern only lasted a week after realising her job was essentially unpaid manual labour, and long hours just carrying and packing away clothing returned from shoots. The interns who lasted months would eventually quit from burnout. There was just a steady churn of young, impressionable workers and nothing was ever done about it – it just became a test of who had the thickest skin.”

While Sarah lasted in her job for two years, the excitement of working in fashion soon gave way to frustration and tedium: “Admin tasks with long hours and bad pay.” Without management offering her a clear career trajectory or a sense of progress, she says her job eventually ground her down – she **quit**. “Both management and employees knew it was a competitive workplace to be at – that your job would always be in high demand. If you left, you’d be replaced with another young worker excited to be there.”

Experts say there are many employers that specifically hire new graduates looking to pursue their passions – often in competitive, even ‘glamorous’ careers. In some cases, this can be great for these workers, who are looking for a way into an industry of their dreams. Sometimes, however, young employees can get ground down in low-paying, demanding roles, as employers know that vacancies will always be hotly desired. These situations can leave early-career workers, hoping to establish themselves, making them vulnerable to burnout or disillusionment right at the start of their careers.

‘Unclouded by experience’

Many jobs are set up with the expectation that younger workers will grow into them. There are often clear paths for promotion and goals to reach; sometimes companies even offer mentorship and development programmes to guide entry-level employees up

the ladder. Even if the climb can be a slog, many employers want to invest in workers to stay with an organisation.

Yet experts say there are other companies that take a different tack – setting up infrastructures in which they hire young employees that have little, if any, opportunity for upward trajectory, and then load them up with demanding tasks. In these situations, employers often expect that these young workers will leave the organisation at some point – whether it's because they're at a dead-end or they've burnt out from the position. Then, they are generally replaced by other young workers, destined for the same fate. Of course, young employees are often expected to **grind out the early years** of their careers by showing ambition, persistence and resilience in the workplace – in some sense, **'paying their dues'**. Not every young worker without an explicit growth path is at a company that intentionally churns through entry-level talent, says Helen Hughes, associate professor at Leeds University Business School, UK. She points to public relations, for instance, where starting, lower-paid roles “fit into a person's career trajectory: the expectation is that in the early stages, you have to take junior roles before you can progress”.

Yet some decide to establish what Hughes calls a “short-sighted model”. There are many reasons companies choose to churn through young workers, instead of investing in them.

First, there are the financial implications. Fresh grads begin at the bottom of the ladder on starting salaries, and don't have the same compensation expectations of experienced employees. “Employers often hire graduates because they can pay them less,” says Dominik Raškaj, marketing manager at job listings site Posao.hr, based in Croatia. “It's effectively a source of cheap, undervalued labour.”

Additionally, entry-level workers may be more malleable and willing to accept certain working conditions. “The less experienced the employee is, the more open-minded and generally accepting they are of a work environment,” says Hughes. “They're unclouded by experience, which brings advantages to an employer – they're easier to mould.” However, this can leave young workers looking to break into a career susceptible to **mis-sold jobs** or **toxic working environments**. “Graduates can find themselves vulnerable to exploitation where they haven't acquired the experience to know what's OK and what's not,” says Hughes. “Graduates can get a sense that it's really competitive, so they feel desperate to accept a challenging role that may not have the best conditions.”

'It can warp someone's view'

In these situations, the short-term risk is burnout. Workers may find themselves burdened with long hours, massive workloads or menial tasks, and, due to their lack of seniority, **unable to advocate for themselves**. It can leave workers frustrated at best, or in cases like Sarah's, under a lot of stress.

Many, however, feel like they don't have a choice but to stick it out, especially if they're trying to break into certain industries with high barriers to entry. For young workers desperate to establish themselves in a competitive career, faced with long hours and bad working conditions, the effects can be insidious.

"Some might decide to stay and burn themselves out because they're early-career," says Hughes. "But without past experiences to benchmark against, the risk is they accept this is what the workplace entails, bad conditions become normalised and the young worker ends up thinking this is all they're worth."

This can have longer-term knock-on effects for these young workers, souring their expectations of what it means to be in the workforce at all. "You see workers begin to withdraw, hold back the effort and display **quiet quitting** behaviours," says Jim Harter, chief scientist for workplace management and wellbeing at US analytics-firm Gallup. "It can warp someone's view of what a career means, and their relationship with work."



Graduates can find themselves vulnerable to exploitation where they haven't acquired the experience to know what's OK and what's not – Helen Hughes

"Graduates can be so worried about getting a job that they think any will do," adds Hughes. But working long, hard hours on bad pay with no end in sight creates long-term consequences. "You adjust to the norm around you – bad norms – right at the beginning of your career."

The good news is the current employee-favourable job market can give young workers options if they find they're in an exploitative position with no path to advance, or that's becoming highly taxing. "There are now also more questions being asked about graduate jobs," says Hughes. "And there's more calling out of bad work practices on social media, meaning there's greater pressure for organisations that don't look after their young employees to change."

However, even in the age of staffing shortages and online reviews, many of these tough environments will endure. This means the burden may fall to entry-level employees to recognise when they're in a bad position. But identifying this may be easier said than done, since employees with little workforce experience may not know what's standard in a junior role, versus what may be a step too far.

Sarah, for her part, did recognise that her job had pushed her to the breaking point and left. But instead of moving within the industry, she took another path. She now works for a creative agency outside of fashion. She says she's much happier in her new role that offers clear progression, challenging work and varied daily tasks. "[Fashion] may have sounded like an impressive place to work," she says, "but I realised it's more important to have a fulfilling job than a cool name on a CV."

Sarah's surname is being withheld for career considerations (BBC News, n.d.)