

Everything to prove

Naomi Rosh White reports on young graduates' experience of casual work.

I'm brown-nosing, but that's what you've got to do... you have to promote yourself to survive.

Female, secondary school teacher

Australia has the second highest proportion of temporary or casual workers of any developed country, second only to Spain, and the numbers continue to grow with the casual employee sector the fastest growing area of the Australian job market.

Short-term contracts, labour force mobility, career changes and high rates of casual employment are some of the features of the post-industrial workplace. While casualisation has long been a feature of the non-professional sector, it is now an entrenched feature of many of the fields into which university graduates enter.

Much of the research on young casual workers examines the 15-24 year old age group working while at school or in tertiary education. This study explores the psycho-social experiences of a less researched category of workers and asks how young recent university graduates seeking permanent work in their field of expertise feel about their status as casual workers and the quality of their working life.

THERE'S NO PREDICTABILITY IN CASUAL WORK

The overriding feeling for young graduates interviewed was of uncertainty of tenure and dispensability. One way of dealing with dispensability was to systematically and self-consciously 'manage up', keeping the boss informed about what they were doing both to show that they were completing tasks well, to get feedback and to ensure that they were being kept in mind.

NOBLES AND PEASANTS

DISEMPOWERMENT AND MARGINALISATION

Casuals feel disempowerment because of their inability

to influence the likelihood of ongoing work, days or hours worked, start and finish times and breaks. It extends to their role in the organisation.

Organisations with strategies to deal with these difficulties reap the rewards of a stronger sense of commitment to the job and colleagues. A social worker said her organisation had established casuals meetings run by managers where casuals were given updates on what was going on in the organisation. Another interviewee spoke about team building activities run at the travel booking call centre at which he worked.

I feel like I am unimportant and somewhat separate from the team... I feel my opinions or suggestions are left unregarded because I'm a temp.

Male, IT support worker

NOT PART OF THE WORK FAMILY

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AT WORK

Being the only casual employee means that there is little opportunity for a collective sense of shared situation to develop.

For graduates employed in their nominated professional field, fostering social connections at work is very important.

Some company practices underscored casual workers' marginal status.

FROM PILLAR TO POST PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Casuals reported being thrown from task to task which offered few useful learning opportunities. Irregular and shorter hours made it unlikely that they could see these projects through.

Fragmentation is particularly a problem when it is coupled with the assignment of menial or unchallenging jobs.

But task fragmentation was also seen to have some positive consequences, one of which was offering exposure to a diversity of tasks. The lack of 'down' time can also affect the tasks assigned. Responsibility disproportionate to casuals' position and experience level was either perceived to be exploitative, an unwelcome difficulty or an opportunity to learn.

I really enjoy the variety... It keeps me stimulated and means I'm constantly learning new things and learning to work under different systems.

Male, IT support worker

Being a worker in a casual capacity you are pushed from pillar to post: do this, do that. Three days of work on this project, then a couple on another. You're not given much time to get your head around things before you've left it.

Female, Research Assistant

WORK DOMINATES SOCIAL LIFE

Flexible hours, higher pay per hour and less responsibility were seen as both advantageous and disadvantageous, enhancing and restricting work-life balance. Where work was uninteresting or where the social environment was unsatisfactory, flexible hours offered a welcome escape.

But unpredictable income led some interviewees to continue to live with their parents, thereby delaying the independence associated with the transition to adulthood.

Casual work is a formative, potentially constructive experience in professional working life. In future, more systematic attention might usefully be given devising and evaluating work practices that improve outcomes for both young professional casual employees and the organisations that employ them.

I actually hate casual work. It's very hard to be organised. It's not always stable. It's ever changing and completely contingent on the demands of the people you work for, when they want you. You are at someone else's mercy and I really dislike that.

Female, Research Assistant

Normally you're in a team environment, whereas at the moment I sit at the computer for eight hours just doing (my work) by myself.

Female, Project Manager market research

Naomi Rosh White, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University.

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