

Do Young People Like Working in Fast Food?

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Abstract

Youth employment and unemployment are important and controversial public-policy issues. Fast food is a major employer of youth labour and it is often characterised as a low grade, unskilled and unpleasant form of work. This paper reports on the results of a survey of university students working in fast food. The research indicates that while some youths find aspects of the work distasteful, a significant proportion of young people find the work interesting and socially rewarding. Despite critics' negative characterisations, then, our results suggest that fast food work is not necessarily a 'bad' job, but it can have positive aspects.

Introduction

Since its beginnings, work in fast food has attracted young workers for several reasons. The work does not require formal qualifications and youths have encountered few barriers to entry. The working hours are convenient to the needs of young people enabling them to combine casual work with study. Fast food employers have also targeted the recruitment and selection of youths as a young, flexible and cheap labour force. Fast food in Australia is now a major employer of youth labour. But is fast food employment a 'good' job or not?

Much of the literature about fast food adopts a critical and negative perspective on the nature of work in the industry. A recent and provocative discussion on the nature of fast food has been offered by the American, Eric Schlosser, in his book *Fast Food Nation*. Schlosser (2001) offers a scathing critique of the deleterious effects of fast food on consumer health, industry suppliers and the fast food workforce. Schlosser (2001:8-10) acknowledges that while the criticisms of fast food are often grounded in a form of cultural elitism which frowns upon popular culture, he claims that his investigation reveals the darker side of fast food in terms of where it comes

from, how it is made and the effects it has on the community.

Schlosser (2001:68-72) contends that fast food employers do not employ youths out of altruism. Rather, young people are targeted because their youthful inexperience makes them easy to control. Obedience is the attribute most valued in the fast food employee. Young employees are also targeted because they are cheap to employ as they are prepared to work for low rates of pay as many of them live at home with their parents, and fast food offers a convenient way of gaining some economic independence.

For Schlosser (2001:87), fast food work is low grade employment. Customers look down on fast food employees and commonly abuse staff if orders are incorrect or service slow. He argues that employees dislike working with customers and prefer to work in the food preparation areas. The work is boring, repetitive and largely unskilled. Further, a central aim of fast food work design is to reduce the skill content of the work and so minimise training expenditure. As one fast food executive stated: 'employees can abuse our product, mess up the flow ... if the equipment only allows one process, there's very little to

train' (Schlosser, 2001:71). Other negative aspects of fast food work are the health and safety problems. Employees face a range of hazards in the form of slips, falls, strains and burns as well as the threat of robbery - fast food outlets hold a lot of cash. As a result of these poor conditions, staffing turnover in the industry is high: perhaps 300 or 400 per cent turnover *per annum*.

Fast food managers are pressured to keep costs as low as possible, particularly labour costs. This can lead to poor treatment of staff and abuses of labour law. For instance, staff can be called in and sent home 'at will' giving them little control of income and hours worked. In some cases, managers make employees perform unpaid work either before or after their scheduled shift. Fast food employers are also notoriously anti-union and go to great lengths to keep unions out of the workplace. The individual managers themselves influence to a considerable extent whether fast food work is an enjoyable or unpleasant experience (Schlosser, 2001:68-75; 82).

The negative views of Schlosser (2001) are similar to those of other authors. The perception of anti-unionism is supported in the European literature (see, Royle, 1999 and 2000). In Australia there is evidence that few fast food employees have contact with unions (White, 1997a:26) which probably reflects the hostility of some employers as well as the inactivity of unions. The fast food industry is also portrayed as exploitative in terms of employers' expectations of unpaid labour (White, 1997a&b), institutionalised low pay due the structure of youth wages (AIRC, 1999) and the subservient (Munro, 1992) and deskilled nature of the work (Reeders, 1988).

In the following paragraphs we report the findings of a survey of university students working in fast food — an

under-researched area of youth employment (Lucas and Ralston, 1997). We asked fast food workers a range of questions about their attitudes and experiences in fast food. Our intention was to establish what aspects of this work employees liked and disliked. Our aim was to examine the claims by critics that fast food work is a low-grade and distasteful form of employment.

Method

Based on an extensive review of the fast food literature, we developed a survey instrument. We conducted a pilot in August 2000 among a group of university students with fast food experience. Following further refinement and development, we administered the survey to university students at Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology at campuses in Brisbane and the Gold Coast. The survey was administered to large first and second year classes. We surveyed 201 students aged 21 years and younger. Most of these students were enrolled in commerce or business studies. We surveyed students currently working in fast food as well as students who no longer worked in fast food but had done so in the past.

Findings

Our sample of people 21 years and younger comprised 41 per cent men and 59 per cent women. This strong representation of women may reflect their greater diligence in attending lectures. In terms of age, over two-thirds of respondents were aged 18 or 19 which largely reflects the first and second year university population we surveyed. The vast majority of these youths were employed on a casual (88 per cent) rather than a permanent basis. Our survey confirms the popular perception that fast food is a casualised industry.

Despite the casual nature of fast food employment, almost half of our

respondents (44 per cent) indicated that they worked regular hours with another quarter stating that they sometimes worked regular hours. Only a third reported not working regular hours. However, the regularity of work patterns for employees varied considerably between schooling and non-schooling periods. During the university teaching period, students worked on average 15 hours per week - a considerable workload given the demands of full-time education. As may be expected, our respondents worked more hours in the non-teaching period: an average of 22 hours per week.

Our results show that the starting age of employment is relatively young. Almost half of respondents started work at 15 years (31 per cent) or younger (18 per cent). Another third started employment at 16 years of age (33 per cent). Only 18 per cent were 17, 18 or 19 years of age when they commenced work in fast food. This results clearly shows that youths are drawn into the fast food labour market at an early age.

Given these young starting ages of employment, it is perhaps not surprising that our respondents had relatively long periods of employment in the fast food industry. We asked respondents how long they had worked in the fast food industry as a whole and not just with their

current or last employer. Only 23 per cent of the youths we surveyed had less than one years service. Some 19 per cent had one years service, 29 per cent had two years and 29 per cent had three or more years service. This length of service data clearly indicates that youths working in fast food do tend to remain in the industry for a considerable period. Whether this industry-job retention reflects the attractiveness of fast food employment or the lack of job alternatives due to high youth unemployment is a moot point.

In the survey, we sought to establish reasons student sought employment in fast food. The responses are shown in Table 1. Typically, students sought fast food work to gain financial independence - they wanted or needed the money or were saving for a specific purpose. Another common reason was to improve career prospects or to gain work experience. Few students, though, wanted to pursue a career in hospitality. Rarely did youths commence employment due to family need - although there could be some reluctance to disclose on this sensitive issue. The results suggest that university students entered the industry to satisfy their immediate income needs with some consideration of the longer-term benefits of work experience. Few envisaged the

Table 1: Reasons for Starting Work in Fast Food

Reason	Percentage
I needed the money	63
I wanted more money to spend on myself	60
I wanted to save money for a specific target (e.g. to buy a CD player etc)	55
I wanted to get any kind of work experience to put on my resumé (CV)	48
My friends were working, so I thought I should as well	27
I thought fast food work experience would improve my career prospects	26
I thought it would be fun	26
My parents thought it was a good idea	20
I wanted to pursue a career in hospitality	8
My family needed the money	5
Convenient hours or location	4

Note: multiple responses possible

industry offering them a long-term career.

Fast Food Experiences

In addition, we also asked students a range of questions about their experiences and views of working in fast food. Student attitudes about a number of features of fast food employment are shown in Table 2. We sought student views on the desirability of working weekends and at night. In terms of night work, a quarter of respondents were neutral on the matter with the remainder split relatively evenly between those in favour of night work (39 per cent) and those who disliked it (36 per cent). For weekend work, though, the results were more polarised, with some 41 per cent expressing dislike for weekend work, while 28 per cent liked it. The greater dislike of weekend as opposed to night work may result because weekend work is arguably a greater interference in social activities than night work. Respondents were very positive about several aspects of fast food employment. Students considered that they had acquired valuable skills working in fast food (60 per cent). The social relations of work, however, was the area where respondents expressed the most positive views about fast food employment. Team-based working was the most liked aspect. Further, some two thirds of students also stated that they enjoyed the social interaction of dealing with customers and working with other employees. These results suggest that students clearly enjoy the human relations aspect of working in the industry.

However, there were also areas where students had less positive views about fast food. Some 29 per cent reported sustaining an injury at work although only 8 per cent need to take time off work as a result of a workplace injury. A majority of respondents stated that fast food workers were not well paid relative to other jobs. Further, students generally

did not like fast food work and found it boring. These results suggest that while students gained some satisfaction from work, they did not generally consider it an interesting and well-paid form of employment.

What were the students' experiences with fast food management? Again, the views were mixed. In terms of the negative aspects of work, students reported that they worked extra hours for free and managers 'hustled' them to work faster and sent them home early without pay if business was slack. A small minority of workers also had wages deducted due to problems they were alleged to have caused at work such as breakages, and were also discouraged from joining a union. These findings are broadly consistent with the views of the critics.

However, despite these negative aspects, students also held some positive views and experiences with fast food management. The majority of respondents said that they were well trained to do their jobs and that they were given a lot of responsibility in their jobs. A majority also stated that management placed a high priority on health and safety and treated them fairly at work. Students also said that they could speak to managers if they had a problem at work. Only a quarter or less of respondents disagreed with these views.

Conclusion

The results of our survey indicate that for many employees at least, fast food is not as 'bad' a job as some commentators contend. Some employees hold negative views of fast food work; the job is low paid, perhaps seen as boring, they get hustled on the job, sent home early and may work unpaid overtime. In spite of these features, employees tend to enjoy the social relations of working in the industry and believe that they have

Table 2: Attitudes to Fast Food Employment

Item	Strongly agree/ agree	Neutral	Strongly disagree/ disagree	Not applicable	Total
I dislike working at night.	36	25	39	0	100
I like working on the weekend.	28	31	41	1	100
I have learnt valuable skills from working in fast food that will help me in my career	60	18	23	0	100
I like working in teams.	79	18	3	0	100
I enjoy being nice and smiling when dealing with customers.	65	23	10	2	100
The best part of fast food employment is working with other employees.	63	31	7	0	100
I have been injured at work.	29	9	41	22	100
I had to take time off work because of an injury at work	8	8	55	29	100
Employees are relatively well paid for working in fast food, compared with some other jobs.	20	24	54	1	100
I find fast food work boring.	39	37	23	1	100
I like working in fast food	23	33	44	1	100

Table 3: Labour-Management Issues

Item	Strongly agree/ agree	Neutral	Strongly disagree/ disagree	Not applicable	Total
Managers 'hustle' us at work to make us go faster in our jobs.	71	12	17	0	100
When business is slow, managers find an excuse to send staff home, without pay, before their shifts are due to end.	47	19	30	4	100
I work extra hours and do not get paid for this work.	28	13	55	4	100
Managers will deduct some of my wages because of problems I have been alleged to cause at work.	11	16	61	12	100
Managers/supervisors at my workplace discourage employees from joining unions.	11	46	29	14	100
I am well trained to do my job.	66	19	15	0	100
I am given a lot of responsibility in my job.	51	24	25	0	100
The health and safety of employees is a high priority with my employer.	58	18	23	2	100
If I have a problem at work, I know that I can speak to the managers or supervisor/team leader.	66	15	19		100
Fast food managers and supervisors treat me fairly at work.	58	21	21	0	100

acquired valuable skills from work. Further, they were also relatively positive about their managers.

Surveys such as this one raise more questions than they answer. Nevertheless, our research does indicate that employees do not universally dislike working in the industry. In some respects, the overall findings are reasonably positive: employees start employment at a young age and most remain in the industry for a few years. While young people do face high levels of unemployment and thus have restricted employment choices, it is clear that fast food employment is not entirely onerous or distasteful. As Lucas and Ralston (1996) note, there may be a 'coincidence of needs' between fast food employers' need for cheap flexible labour and young peoples' desire for personal spending money and a degree of financial independence.

There is a need for further research. What specific aspects do employees enjoy or dislike about fast food employment? Why do they enjoy or dislike these features? Do secondary school children hold similar views to their tertiary sector counterparts? What are the views of youths who are not participating in secondary or post-education? We hope to address some of these questions in a further phase of our research. For the present, suffice it to note that, like most other fields of employment, fast food employment has positive and negative features.

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