

MarketWatch

What's keeping teenagers unemployed? Online personality tests

By [Jillian Berman](#)

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A new report highlights how hiring practices make it more difficult for teens to get jobs

*Paramount/courtesy Everett Collection**Personality tests are weeding out young people looking for jobs.*

It seems relatively rare these days to encounter a teenager who spends his or her summer or after-school hours bussing tables or working a cash register. And while [many have blamed](#) increasing interest in internships or declining work ethic among today's young people for this trend, a new report points to a different culprit: A dramatic shift in the way employers screen entry-level applicants.

Unemployment among teenagers aged 16 to 19 years was 13.6% in August 2017, up from 13.2% the previous month, but down from 15.6% a year earlier, [according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). That compares to an overall unemployment rate of [4.4% in August 2017](#).

Where once teenagers or early 20-somethings may have wandered into their local supermarket and applied for their first job, [now a substantial share of employers](#) are using online personality assessments to gauge the skill and character of potential dishwashers, burger-flippers and other entry-level jobs.

Personality tests put young job seekers at a disadvantage

That's putting young job seekers at a disadvantage, according to a [report released Wednesday](#) by JobsFirstNYC, a New York City-based nonprofit that advocates for out-of-school and out-of-work young adults. The report is based on an experiment, which asked 18 to 22-year-olds to submit applications to 42 major employers in the New York City area in 2012 and 2014.

The authors found that tests were so extensive — in some cases 200 questions — that they discouraged young people from applying or made it difficult for them to complete the applications, a problem that was particularly acute for low-income young people who may not have regular access to the internet. Young adults may struggle more than older applicants to answer some of the questions because their brain and personality development isn't complete, they added.

"If the way to get in now becomes more difficult because you can't get past this personality assessment test, then the opportunity to get this experience becomes more limited," said Marjorie Parker, the executive director of JobsFirstNYC.

Also see: [5 ways you're sabotaging your own job hunt](#)

The tests reviewed by JobsFirstNYC often use multiple choice questions. For many applicants, and young adults in particular, it may not be immediately clear what these questions have to do with the jobs they're applying to fill. Employers may try to assess the likelihood of a worker "going the extra mile" by asking them how strongly they agree with statements like, "Work is the most important thing in my life," "I admire people who work long hours," "Employees should be expected to work extra hours to finish a job on time."

"I took a few myself," said Parker, whose first job was at a Burger King. "I've never had to take a personality assessment test for a job and it's just extremely difficult."

Eva Grote, who took the personality tests as a 22-year-old as part of the experiment, said she was able to game some questions as she's been working since she's 15. Still, the questions struck her as inappropriate. "I felt like they were just really deep," Grote, now 26, said. When applying for other jobs, she was asked more relevant and specific questions like: "How comfortable would you be asking a customer to sign up for a rewards card?"

Don't miss: [Why you should take bizarre job interview questions very seriously](#)

Some experts disagree. These tests play a valuable role in candidate selection, said Alan Momeyer, the chief human resources emeritus of Loews [L](#), [-0.02%](#) the hospitality and movie-theater chain. Employers often give these tests to high-performing existing employees and prioritize applicants who give similar responses, he said

During his 25-year career as the chief human resources officer at Loews, Momeyer made a major investment in the systems the company used to select workers. He says it paid off: Turnover dropped steadily from 70% in 1997 to about 30% in 2005 and has hovered around that level every year since.

Job candidates for roles in guest services were asked what they would do if they walked into a room cold. Momeyer said his "superstar" guest services people already on staff usually give one answer, which hiring managers hoped the applicants would match. "I look for somebody who looks interesting and I go up and introduce myself."

Standardized testing have a role to play, but they're no magic bullet, he added. "Some employers have really treated it as a science and others are just grasping," he said

Tests that are poorly designed may not hold up if challenged in court, particularly if they're not clearly job-related or have an "adverse impact" — a term for employment practices that appear neutral, but actually wind up discriminating against a certain group, said Gavin Appleby, an employment-side attorney who specializes in tests. Still, when the tests work, they can predict with relative accuracy who will remain in a job, he said.

Also see: [Job applicants are ruining their chances by doing this during the interview](#)

There are other ways to find good talent. Marie Davis, the executive director of the 100k Opportunities Initiative, a coalition of companies working to increase employment for young people who are neither working nor in school, experienced that firsthand when she worked for five years as the national recruiting manager at Chipotle between 2012 and 2012.

Instead of personality tests, all applicants were offered an interview, she said. Other companies are using other ways to make it easier for young people from a variety of backgrounds, such as, eliminating the requirement for a background

check at the beginning of the application process, she said.

“With our unemployment rate so low and competition so high to attract great people, more companies need to take that approach and take down the barriers and give people a shot,” she said.

Of course, it's more than assessments that put young people at a disadvantage when it comes to hiring. The Great Recession and slow recovery meant that older workers who may have shied away from these kinds of frontline jobs are more likely to turn to them. The tests, which may provide an advantage to mature applicants only exacerbates young adults' challenges, Parker said.

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