

**A Best Practice
Toolkit for
Employing
Young People in
Townsville**

Introduction

Over 18 months, young people in Townsville, local employers, and organisations supporting young people came together to co-design practical solutions to youth unemployment in the region. Guided by human-centred design and co-design principles, participants worked side by side to better understand each other's experiences, challenges, and aspirations — and to create solutions that reflect the unique spirit of Townsville.

Together, the group developed and piloted three key ideas:

A Health and Wellbeing Committee to strengthen support and inclusion in workplaces

Promotion of alternative career pathways in schools, earlier in high school to inspire future opportunities

A Best Practice Toolkit for Employing Young People in Townsville – the resource you're reading now.

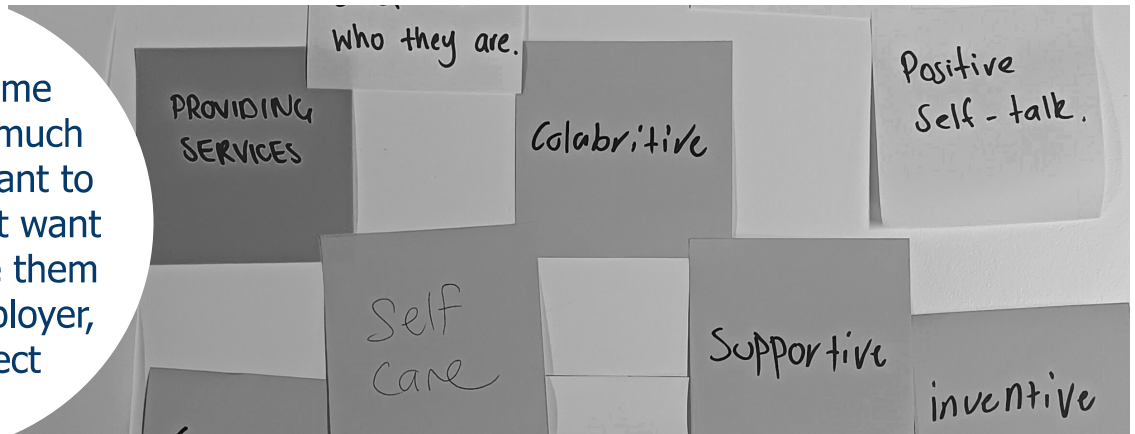
This toolkit captures the perspectives of 20 young people who joined the co-design cohort, along with insights from local employers and youth organisations. It shares their collective thoughts, feelings, and ideas for improving recruitment, interviewing, onboarding, and retention practices across the region.

Rather than a rigid “how-to guide,” this toolkit offers a collection of ideas, practices, and reflections for you to adapt to your business and to each young person you employ. Best practice is not a single destination — it's a process of learning, listening, and evolving.



If there's one clear lesson in this toolkit, it's that every young person in Townsville is an individual. They belong to many different communities, bring unique experiences and skills, and have their own ways of feeling valued and supported. Young people are not a homogenous group — and shouldn't be treated as such. However, as individuals we all act within an overarching system, often imposed on us, and many young people feel powerless to contribute to systems-change. That is one reason projects such as Q-SEED, supported by the John Villiers Trust are so important.

"What struck me most was how much young people want to work — they just want someone to give them a fair go." – Employer, Q-SEED Project



What makes Townsville unique?

A lot of the issues we heard about in Townsville are reflected across regional Queensland and other parts of Australia:

1. Lack of reliable and regular transportation
2. Negative portrayals of young people in the media
3. Mental health and wellbeing

A survey by the Grattan Institute, found one in three Gen Z'ers reported struggling with their mental health. Two in three reporting having problems sleeping. Cost of living, housing, rental affordability and climate change are some of the issues keeping Gen Z up at night (Grattan Institute 2023). This is reflective of the things we heard from young people in Townsville too, with health and wellbeing and workplace culture getting multiple mentions and significant discussion.



"I feel so lucky. Work, for me, has been tough. It's things like this (working on the Q-SEED project) that make me feel like everything's going to be okay." – Q-SEED youth Participant

"I feel like those companies that say they are "one big family" is a huge red flag for me, it's often said by business to justify mistreatment and poor behaviour."

– Q-SEED youth Participant



"Employers ask unrealistic questions like 'what will you be doing in 10 years' time?' I don't know!" – Q-SEED Youth Participant

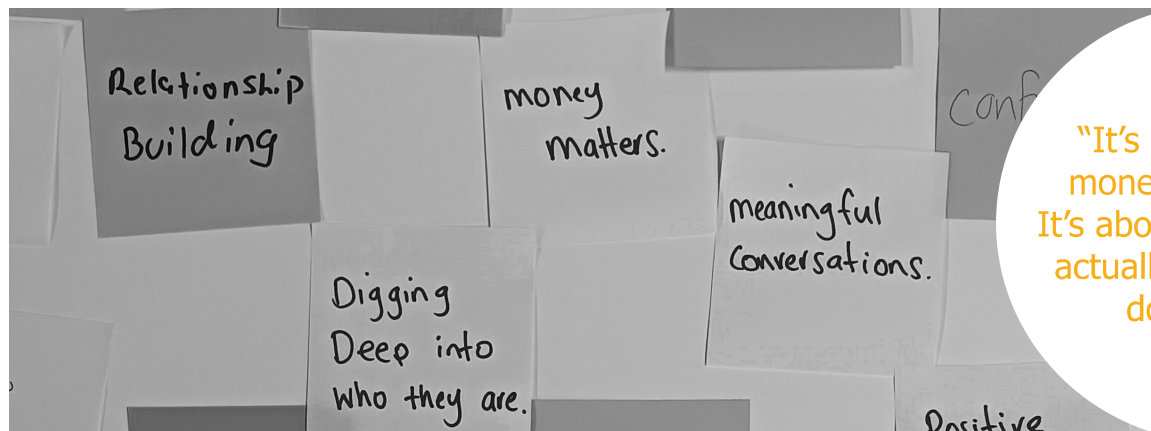
However, the stark difference when compared with other research or co-design projects with young people in metropolitan Australia, was the motivation and ethics of an organisation. A lot of research suggests Gen Z are only interested in working for ethical companies and would work for less money if the organisation aligned with their values – this didn't appear to be the case with the young people in the Q-SEED design cohort.

More important to young people in Townsville was:

1. Reliability and consistency of shifts
2. Treatment from direct line manager
3. Opportunities to build confidence and learn new skills
4. Supportive and inclusive environments, especially for those with complex experiences or barriers

"What's helped me in the past is putting resources to point me in the right direction even in the application phase."
– Q-SEED Youth Participant

Young people also emphasised how much connection and care matter. They wanted to feel like their contribution was recognised, and that employers genuinely cared about them as people, not just as workers.



According to Y Lab's Future of Work Report, "By 2030, Gen Z will make up one third of Australia's working population. This younger generation is looking for better work-life balance, flexibility, finding work aligned to their values, and prioritising their mental health and wellbeing."

In Townsville, we found those priorities were the same — but expressed in more practical, day-to-day ways:

"Can I get to work reliably?"

"Will my boss be fair?"

"Will I learn something useful here?"

How to attract young people to your business

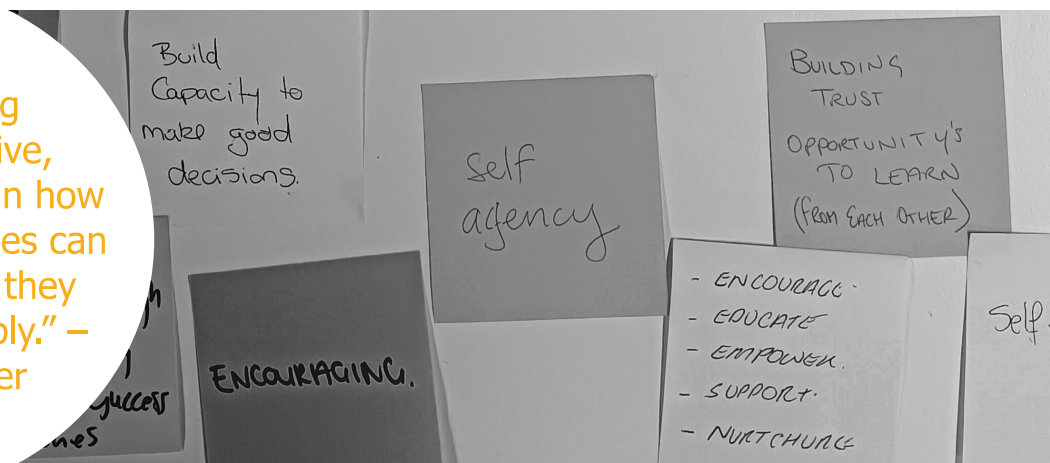
All of the 20 young people in the Q-SEED project were keen to work and had a variety of skills and experience, ranging from multiple jobs to never having worked at all.

Overwhelming, young people expressed extreme frustration at being told to get experience before applying for entry level roles:

"Some jobs require no experience, but still require courses or will pick someone with experience." —
Q-SEED Youth Participant

"I said I'd work for free, but no one would give me experience." — Q-SEED Youth Participant

"From the young people's perspective, even small changes in how you communicate roles can transform whether they feel welcome to apply." – Q-SEED employer



Advertising roles

The young people we spoke with were clear: most job ads feel cold, confusing, and unwelcoming. They want to understand what the role is really like, who they'll be working with, and what they'll get out of it — not just what they'll give.

They also highlighted that honesty and specificity go a long way: tell applicants what the role actually involves, what the pay is, and what support or training is really offered.

What helps ✓

- Use clear, simple language – avoid jargon like self-starter or fast-paced environment.
- List pay rates, even for casual roles. Transparency builds trust.
- Include location and transport information – e.g. nearby bus routes or parking.
- Add short videos or photos showing your workplace and team.
- Name a contact person so applicants can ask questions – and make it clear it's okay to reach out.
- Advertise roles where young people already are: local Facebook pages, libraries, community boards, youth centres, or schools – not just SEEK or Indeed.
- Mention opportunities to learn or grow, even if small – e.g. "We provide on-the-job training" or "We support staff to complete their licence or study."

"Some jobs say training is provided but in reality it isn't always the case."
– Q-SEED Youth Participant



“When you apply online, it’s like you’re sending your resume into a void. You never hear back or get a real person to talk to.”

Try this:

Reframe job ads as invitations, not instructions. For example:

“We’re looking for someone curious and reliable to join our team. You don’t need experience — we’ll teach you the rest.”

How to foster a more inclusive environment in a job interview

Young people told us traditional interviews often feel intimidating and disconnected. For many, sitting across from three people with clipboards feels less like a conversation and more like a test, provoking anxiety and an inability to put their best foot forward.

“Make it more like a chat, not such a formal setting. It helps to show who I really am.” – Q-SEED Youth Participant

“The best interviews I’ve been to are the ones that are just transparent — they seem genuine when asking about strengths and weaknesses.” – Q-SEED Youth Participant

“When young people can’t let employers know where their limits are, employers might push them in the job without realising it.” – Q-SEED Youth Participant

They also raised concerns about dishonesty and power imbalance during interviews — when employers oversell the role or when young people feel pressured to hide their limits to appear employable.

What helps



- Treat interviews as chats, not interrogations.
- Choose neutral or relaxed settings – e.g. a café, library, quiet workspace, or even go for a walk and a talk if appropriate, rather than a sterile office. Offer options – find out what candidates need.
- Focus on values, teamwork, and learning potential, not perfect answers.
- Let applicants know what to expect ahead of time – who will be in the room and what you'll talk about.
- Be human – smile, explain your notes, acknowledge nerves.
- Offer feedback, even briefly, so the young person learns from the experience.
- For entry-level roles, consider “working interviews” – a few hours of supervised hands-on experience followed by reflection.

Inclusive interview practices don't just support young people — they help you find genuine, motivated employees who feel seen and respected from day one.

Now what – the ideal first day on the job

The first day can make or break a young person's confidence. A positive experience can turn nerves into pride and loyalty. A bad day-one can lead to self-doubt or early resignation.

“I was just told to sit at my laptop and do about 100 questions, nobody talked with me or let me do anything.” – Q-SEED Youth Participant



“All the hospo jobs I've had just give you a tour and no training at all.” – Q-SEED Youth Participant

“I didn't see the store manager the entire time I worked there.” – Q-SEED Youth Participant

New starters were often left feeling forgotten or confused. Small gestures like a personal welcome, a buddy, or a clear plan on what to expect in the first days and weeks make a huge difference.

What helps ✓

Be ready before they arrive – workspace, uniform, logins, and introductions.

- Send a short message or call beforehand to say you're looking forward to meeting them or them starting.
- Pair them with a buddy – someone approachable who checks in daily for the first week.
- Host a morning tea or welcome moment – small gestures matter.
- Walk them through the basics: where the toilets are, how to clock on, who to ask for help.
- Go slow on the first day – schedule time for settling in, not just training.
- Consider which online induction procedures are vital to the role (or not) on day one.
- Follow up at the end of week one and month one to ask, "How are you going?"



"It's all those little details that make you feel cared for — like the business actually wants you there." – Q-SEED youth Participant

Young people are in your business, but how do you keep them there?

Sometimes you won't, and that's ok too! Sometimes preparing young people for their next role is an important part of creating employment opportunities for young people.

The young people in our co-design cohort talked about great managers who helped them see where the skills they developed in their current roles could see them go in the future:

"Doing bartending, I was told I could stick to doing traineeship and stuff in Townsville, but then I could also, when I'm done, apply for a bartending job on a cruise ship and then just travel the world." – Q-SEED Youth Participant



What helps ✓

- Provide regular check-ins that focus on wellbeing and development, not just performance.
- Celebrate small wins — finishing training, handling a tough customer, or hitting a milestone.
- Offer pathways — short courses, shadowing other roles, or flexible study arrangements.
- Be honest about opportunities for growth and promotion.
- Encourage feedback: “What’s working for you here? What could we do better?”
- Connect young people with local networks or other employers if their interests evolve.

Remember:

Retention isn’t only about pay increases — it’s about belonging, growth, and care.

Embrace Individuality in the Workplace

As you implement the insights and recommendations in this toolkit, it’s important to remember that young people are not a homogenous group. They come from diverse backgrounds, have unique experiences, and bring individual strengths, challenges, and aspirations.

“People who don’t need support get extra support, while people who need that course, or extra help get cut off from it.” — Q-SEED Youth Participant reflecting on the criteria for employment support services

While we've provided general themes and suggestions based on the experiences and feedback from young people in Townsville, the real success lies in how you adapt these practices to the individual. What works for one young person may not work for another. Some may need more flexibility, some might thrive on structure. Some may have more experience, others may be starting fresh.

The key takeaway from this co-design process is to see the individual. Get to know the unique skills, needs, and motivations of each young person who joins your business. Offer them the space and support to grow at their own pace. By doing so, you'll not only help them succeed but also create a more engaged, motivated, and diverse workforce.

"What struck me throughout this whole process was just how capable all these young people are. These young people who have experienced real hardship in their lives, and in their employment journey, were so willing to work on something together to change the opportunity landscape for other young people in their community. That's really special, and I think employers would really miss out by not having these valuable young people in their workplaces." – Q-SEED Co-design facilitator

Remember:

When you hire a young person, you're not just filling a vacancy – you're investing in someone's potential. Embrace their individuality, support their development, and adapt to their needs. Together, you'll build a stronger, more resilient workforce for Townsville's future.

Acknowledgements

The Q-SEED Youth project was generously funded by The John Villiers Trust.



*OUT HERE
FOR GOOD*

The Q-SEED Youth project was delivered alongside Q-SEED, a partnership between CQUniversity, Smart Precinct NQ and Proxima.



We recognise the ongoing support of the following organisations in delivering change with the young people of Townsville

