International Labour Organization

ILO brief

Policy Brief

October 2026

Breaking the youth experience trap

Hiring for entry-level jobs: substituting experience and testing skills-based job design

Key points

- The "youth experience trap" refers to the systemic challenges youth face when entering the job market, particularly the paradox of needing work experience to gain employment while being unable to acquire that experience without first securing a job.
- This dilemma can lead to prolonged unemployment or underemployment among youth and perpetuates economic disparities.
- As companies increasingly prioritize experience and qualifications, many capable young people find themselves overlooked, raising critical concerns about the inclusivity and fairness of hiring practices in today's labour markets.
- Skills-based hiring, which prioritizes specific competencies over traditional qualifications, has gained traction as a means to combat the youth experience trap. By focusing on observable skills rather than prior job titles or degrees, employers can cultivate a more diverse and capable workforce.
- As the job landscape continues to evolve, addressing the youth experience trap becomes imperative for fostering economic growth, reducing poverty, and empowering the next generation of workers.
- Including youth makes social dialogue work for and with them, advancing decent work and social justice.

1. Introduction

Labour market access for youth is an overall concern. ILO estimates indicate that the global youth unemployment rate stood at 12.4 per cent in 2025, translating to 67 million young people aged 15-24 actively seeking work and not finding it.[1] The share of youth who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) reached 20 per cent in the same year, meaning roughly 257 million young people are, for the moment, outside the channels through which skills, experience, and labour market attachment are normally built. That NEET figure deserves more attention than it typically receives.

Acknowledgements: This Brief was authored by Sergio Iriarte Quezada, ILO Youth Employment Unit. The author acknowledges the helpful reviews made by Sara Elder, Unit Head Employment Analyses & Economic Policies Unit, Dorothea Schmidt-Klau, Branch Chief Employment, Labour Markets and Youth, Chiara Curcio and Eesha Moitra, Youth Employment Unit - ILO Employment, Skills and Sustainable Enterprises Department.

[1] ILO, Global Employment Trends for Youth 2026: Back to the future, 2026. All figures in this section come from this report.

Unemployment, as measured in the strict statistical sense, captures those who are jobless, available, and actively looking for a job. NEET reaches further, catching the young people who have stepped back from that search altogether, often because repeated setbacks have made it feel unaffordable or pointless. Unemployed and NEETs are not necessarily the same populations and putting them together risks a partial picture of what is actually happening to young people at the margins of the transition to decent work.

It is when the data is broken down by sex that the picture becomes hardest to ignore. Young women are more than twice as likely than young men to be NEET. That is not a gap that individual choices can adequately explain. It points instead to structural constraints that operate well upstream of any hiring decision, e.g., unpaid care responsibilities, restricted mobility, discrimination, and the persistent segmentation of both training systems and employment pathways by gender. Remarkably, youth unemployment rates by sex can appear almost identical at the global level. ILO data for 2025, for instance, show unemployment at 12.6 per cent for young men and 12.1 per cent for young women, a small difference that might suggest near-parity. Read alongside the NEET figures, though, that apparent convergence looks quite different. Unemployment counts those still attached to the labour force, NEET begins to reveal who has already been excluded.

This brief starts from that tension. Improving youth labour market outcomes is not, or not only, a matter of reducing unemployment rates. It requires fixing the entry points and pathways that determine whether young people, and particularly young women, can access a first job that builds recognized experience under conditions consistent with decent work.

▶ 2. The youth experience trap?

2.1. What is the trap?

The experience trap is, at its core, a mismatch problem. Entry-level vacancies increasingly require prior experience or credentials that many young applicants cannot possibly have, and employers turn to these requirements because uncertainty has a cost they would rather not absorb. Degrees and years of experience serve as rough filters that reduce perceived hiring risk. For youth, the result is delayed labour market entry, longer spells of job search, a higher likelihood of landing in informal or low-quality work that leads nowhere in terms of transferable skills. *The spiral is as predictable as it is difficult to break: you need experience to get a job, but you need a job to get experience.*

2.2. Why it persists? Five reinforcing mechanisms

The youth experience trap persists due to reinforcing labour-market mechanisms that make it rational for employers to demand experience, even for jobs labelled entry-level. At the centre is how skills are signalled, interpreted, and trusted. When employers cannot easily observe employability or job-relevant skills, they fall back on proxies such as "years of experience" or "degree required", which appear to reduce uncertainty but often exclude capable young candidates.

Information asymmetry is the starting point. For many entry-level roles, a resume provides limited evidence about whether an applicant can perform core tasks reliably, safely, and at the expected pace, especially where education quality varies, where curricula do not reflect workplace tasks, or where young people gained skills informally (e.g., family work, informal apprenticeships, gig work, volunteering, or care responsibilities). OECD analysis describes skills signalling as a chain, skills acquisition, communication, and recognition, and notes that investments in skills will not translate into labour-market opportunities if individuals cannot communicate their skills effectively or if employers do not prioritize and trust that information.[2] The result is that youth potential often remains invisible at the point where hiring decisions are made.

That information gap leads directly to **screening and risk management** practices. Employers face real costs that include onboarding time, supervision, and the financial impact of early turnover. When

[2] OECD, Empowering the Workforce in the Context of a Skills-First Approach, 2024.

these costs are high, or when firms lack time and managerial capacity to train, screening becomes a risk-reduction strategy. Experience thresholds and credential filters reduce the applicant pool quickly, but they also replace assessment with the assumption that the proxy (e.g., two years' experience) stands in for actual capability. This dynamic is one reason skills-based approaches stress the need to validate skills through structured assessments rather than relying on institutional prestige or informal networks.

Screening practices can become a mechanism that compounds over time through **credential inflation**. As more people pursue education and as applicant pools grow, employers may raise formal requirements even when job tasks have not changed, using degrees as a convenient sorting mechanism. Research tracking skills-based hiring shows that many employers have committed to removing degree requirements, explicitly recognizing that degrees often function as a proxy rather than a necessity.[3] Yet the same research also finds that actual hiring practices often change slowly unless firms redesign selection processes, manager incentives, and onboarding arrangements. This matters for youth because credential inflation converts what might have been a "trainable" entry role into a role that requires signals many young people cannot afford or access.

A fourth mechanism is **weak transition institutions**, which limit credible, protected school-to-work pathways. Where quality apprenticeships, work-based learning, career guidance, and effective public employment services (PES) are limited, fewer young people can accumulate recognized experience, and fewer employers can rely on trusted channels. The ILO has long documented how transitions to decent work can be tentative and indirect, and its School-to-Work Transition Survey (SWTS) was designed precisely to capture these pathways and the obstacles young people face. More recently, ILO work has expanded transition indicators and continues to emphasize the role of employment services, labour market programmes, and integrated approaches to support youth transitions into decent jobs. Where these institutions are stronger, particularly where apprenticeships are well designed and governed through social dialogue, young people can gain structured first experience, and employers can hire with less uncertainty.

Finally, the trap is intensified by **inequality widening**, which besides being a cause can also be seen as an effect. Even when young people have relevant skills, unequal access to networks, internships, transport, digital tools, safe mobility, or affordable credentials can reduce their ability to convert skills into job offers. Gender norms and care responsibilities can constrain job search time and acceptable working hours, disability can interact with inaccessible recruitment processes, migrants and minorities can face discrimination or undervaluation of prior learning. Skills-based systems can mitigate these barriers by broadening recognized evidence of capability, but they can also reproduce inequities if assessments are costly, biased, or opaque. OECD cautions that barriers to skills-first adoption include unequal access to digital tools and challenges in validating and trusting non-traditional credentials.[4]

► Table 1: Youth experience trap five reinforcing mechanisms

Mechanism	How it contributes to the trap
Information asymmetry	Employers cannot easily observe work-relevant skills from CVs, especially where education quality varies or where young people gained skills informally.
Screening and risk management	When onboarding capacity is weak or turnover is costly, employers screen more, using experience/credential thresholds to reduce uncertainty.
Credential inflation	As applicant pools grow, employers raise formal requirements even when tasks have not changed, excluding capable candidates.
Weak transition institutions	Limited apprenticeships, work-based learning, career guidance, and PES reduce the flow of credible entry pathways.
Inequality widening	Gender norms, care responsibilities, location, disability, migration status, and discrimination can reduce access to networks, internships, and first jobs.

Taken together (table 1), these five mechanisms explain why the experience trap is persistent: it is not merely a youth deficit, but a labour market coordination problem in which employers' rational

[3] Burning Glass Institute and Harvard Business School, Skills-Based Hiring: The Long Road from Pronouncements to Practice, 2024.

[4] OECD, Unfilled job vacancies? A skills-first approach can help, 2024.

responses to uncertainty, combined with weak transition systems and unequal opportunities, produce systematic exclusion. Breaking the trap therefore requires shifting from proxy-based screening to credible skills signalling and validation, paired with quality pathways (e.g., apprenticeships, work-based learning, public employment services support) that create first experience under decent work conditions.

2.3. How this approach differs from “fair hiring”?

“Fair hiring” usually refers to recruitment practices that aim to reduce discrimination and strengthen procedural fairness, such as structured interviews, clearer selection criteria, transparency around decision-making, and some mechanism for accountability. Those measures matter and are part of ILO concerns on equality of opportunity and treatment, non-discrimination, and due process in recruitment. It is worth admitting a limitation that often gets overlooked.

Even when a process is procedurally sound, it can remain socially selective if the vacancy itself is built on barriers that screen youth out before they ever reach an interview. Many entry-level postings proceed that way. For instance, they ask for two years of prior experience, a tertiary degree for tasks that are routine, or previous experience in a similar role, when what is really needed is the ability to learn quickly and work safely. In that sense, fair hiring can be polishing the front end of the pipeline while leaving the gate open in the same place.

The key difference is that this brief focuses upstream, on how entry-level roles are designed before recruitment even begins. The logic is to break experience traps by redesigning entry roles and substituting experience requirements with skills signals that young people can realistically demonstrate.

Fair hiring remains the floor. The proposition here is that it is not the ceiling.

2.4. No experience, no entry

A useful illustration of the experience trap comes from a BBC Worklife investigation[5] that puts a number on something many young jobseekers already take as a given, i.e., "entry-level" often is not really entry-level. An analysis of close to 4 million LinkedIn job postings since late 2017[6] found that 35 per cent of roles carrying that label still required years of prior relevant experience. In software and IT services, the gap was more than 60 per cent of “entry-level” listings asked for three or more years of experience.

When labour markets are slack and training budgets thin, leaning on experience as a quick filter could make sense in the short run, especially for line managers who have little room for structured onboarding. But the cumulative effect is quietly damaging, the first line of the career ladder gets lifted a little higher each cycle, and "job-ready" shifts from being something a first job is supposed to produce, to something candidates with which are expected to arrive.[7]

What makes this pattern worth examining in the context of decent work transitions is that it does not simply push back the moment young people enter employment. It also shapes where they land when they do. From the BBC’s investigation, in the United States, around 43 per cent of college graduates were estimated to be underemployed in their first role, meaning they started out in jobs that did not typically require a degree.

Individual cases are always more complicated. For instance, some graduates choose lower-skilled work for personal or family reasons, and definitions of underemployment shift depending on the dataset. But at scale these figures suggest it will seem that something structural is happening. Entry routes are not reliably bridging the gap between education and meaningful work, and talent is not being put to good use.

What is particularly striking, and policy-relevant, is that the heavy reliance on prior experience as a hiring filter may not be achieving what employers think it does. A large-scale meta-analysis, synthesizing data from over 80 independent studies, found that the relationship between pre-hire work experience and subsequent job performance was quite weak, and the relationship between prior experience and employee turnover was essentially

[5] BBC, Why inexperienced workers can't get entry-level jobs, 2021.

[6] LinkedIn, Building a Future of Work That Works, 2026.

[7] ILO, ¿Qué sabemos sobre los programas y políticas de Primer empleo en América Latina?, 2015.

zero.[8] In other words, screening out candidates who lack experience does not reliably produce better performers or more loyal employees. One likely reason is that most measures of pre-hire experience capture quantity rather than quality. Simply having held a job in a previous organization says nothing about how well an applicant performed it, and experience gained in one setting may not translate into effective performance in another with a different culture or way of working.

This has important implications for hiring practice, and a direct bearing on equity. If applicants from certain groups, such as women, youth, or people with disabilities, have fewer opportunities to accumulate pre-hire experience, they are less likely to be hired under experience-heavy screening. And if experience is a poor predictor of performance, organizations would struggle to legally or ethically defend those decisions.

For the ILO, this reinforces the case for shifting the conversation, the problem is not simply that young people lack experience, but that experience has become a gatekeeper whose predictive value is far weaker than assumed. The situation is likely to exacerbate in the new era of AI (box 1). Rebuilding credible entry pathways means not just expanding quality apprenticeships and work-based learning but also encouraging employers to design genuine junior roles where skills can actually be developed on the job, under conditions that meet basic standards of decent work.

Box 1. Artificial Intelligence and the experience trap

A growing share of the tasks that typically defined entry level jobs is now exposed to AI, especially in (back) office, office and basic customer support functions. ILO's studies note that clerical support workers are the most exposed occupational group, with 24 per cent of tasks assessed as having high exposure and another 58 per cent as medium exposure to potential automation by GenAI. Those are exactly the kinds of tasks that often appear in first jobs: scheduling, drafting and standardised correspondence, form filling, basic record keeping, simple claims processing, routine reporting.

The ILO's refined global index adds the important nuance that this is likely to mean job transformation rather than outright job loss, because many tasks still require human input, judgement and responsibility. For youth transitions, that distinction matters. If AI is absorbing the routine tasks that used to provide an entry point, employers may raise the work readiness bar for what remains, and entry pathways can narrow unless hiring and training systems adapt.

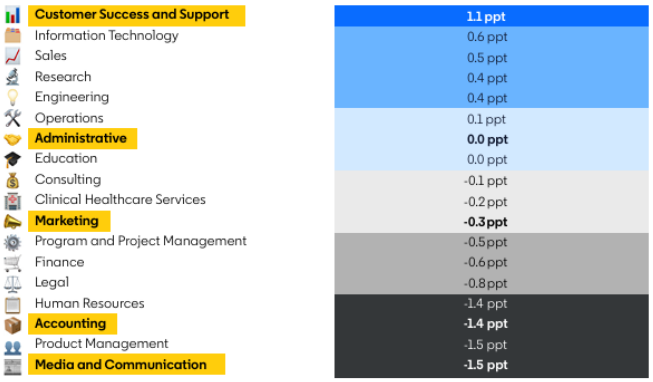
Sources: ILO, Generative AI and Jobs: Policies to Manage the Transition, 2024; ILO, Generative AI and Jobs: A Refined Global Index of Occupational Exposure, 2025.

2.5. Shifts in entry-level versus experienced hiring: recent evidence from online labour market data

LinkedIn's Labour Market Report: Building a Future of Work That Works offers a useful, if partial, window into how employers have been balancing entry-level and experienced hiring. It found that between 2016 and 2022, companies added more entry-level workers than experienced workers, but that from 2022 to 2025 the entry-level share declined modestly, moving back toward historical norms. The report also suggests this shift is not uniform across functions (Figure 1): the entry-level share increased in customer support (+1.1 percentage points (ppt)), information technology (+0.6 ppt) and sales (+0.5 ppt), while it fell in areas such as product management (-1.5 ppt), media and communication (-1.5 ppt), accounting (-1.4 ppt) and human resources (-1.4 ppt). For software engineering, LinkedIn noted a pattern and indicates that entry-level hiring outpaced experienced roles through much of the late 2010s, but entry-level and experienced hiring conditions have since converged as demand reduced.

As with any platform-based indicator, these trends should be treated as signals of changing demand rather than a full labour-market count, but they align with the broader concern in this brief, i.e., when entry-level hiring normalizes downward in a slack labour market, employers may lean more heavily on "experience" screens unless entry roles are redesigned around validated skills and supported onboarding.

► Figure 1: Change in entry-level share, 2022–25



Source: Building a Future of Work That Works, LinkedIn, 2026.

[8] Chad H. Van Iddekinge, John D. Arnold, Rachel E. Frieder, Philip L. Roth, (Van Iddenkinge, 2019). A meta-analysis of the criterion-related validity of pre-hire work experience, Personnel Psychology, The Study of People and Work, Volume 72, Issue 4.

▶ 3. Skills-based jobs design and hiring

3.1. Definitions

Skills-based job design means defining entry-level roles primarily through tasks, context, and the minimum expertise needed to perform them safely and effectively. Skills-based hiring means selecting candidates using methods that directly assess those skills (e.g., structured interviews, work sample tests, and validated credentials), rather than using experience or degrees as default filters.

The starting point is skills-based job design, done with social partners, which includes unpacking the job into tasks, minimum proficiency thresholds, and the real operating context, including occupational safety and health (OSH) routines.

Then comes the slightly uncomfortable question: what is truly required on day one, and what can be developed through structured onboarding in the first four to eight weeks? That conversation is not always easy for employers, and it exposes how much "experience required" is often a shorthand for weak induction capacity or fear of early failure. Once the role is clarified, selection can rely on more credible evidence than years served.

A call-centre role, for example, might use a short simulation where the candidate handles a billing complaint, follows a script, and applies escalation rules, scored against a rubric.

A warehouse entry role can be tested through a pick-and-pack exercise using a mock order list and basic safety checks, rather than filtering on "logistics experience".

Where young people learned informally, recognition of prior learning can help translate that experience into legible signals. Pilots are designed for measurement, using randomised or phased rollout where feasible, and tracking trap indicators such as whether experience requirements actually drop in postings, whether youth without prior formal employment are hired at higher rates, and whether they progress into stable, decent work rather than cycling through short-term arrangements.

3.2. Why is this lever promising

A skills-first approach reduces reliance on proxies and can widen access to decent work by making skills clear. OECD analysis notes that skills-first approaches are emerging across OECD labour markets and examines opportunities and challenges in adopting them, including the need for reliable skills information and recognition.[9] At the same time, employer-tracking research by the Burning Glass Institute and Harvard Business School[10] finds that while many firms have publicly announced dropping degree requirements, most have not yet translated this into sustained changes in hiring outcomes without deeper process reform.

For youth, the potential benefits are straightforward. If an entry-level role is redesigned to specify tasks (i.e., what the worker must do) and to test readiness through a fair assessment, then a candidate can be selected based on demonstrated capability, including skills gained through informal work, volunteering, caregiving responsibilities, or short-term gigs that are often undervalued in conventional CV screening.[11]

3.3. Fairness safeguards

Skills-based hiring should not become a new barrier. Poorly designed assessments can replicate bias. For instance, costly micro-credentials can replace degrees as a barrier. An ILO-aligned approach, following decent jobs standards, therefore requires transparent criteria, time-bounded, job-relevant assessments, payment when the assessment is similar to productive work, data protection and explainability when digital tools are used, and social dialogue to ensure job redesign improves quality, safety, and career progression.

[9] OECD, Empowering the Workforce in the Context of a Skills-First Approach, 2024.
[10] Burning Glass Institute and Harvard Business School, Skills-Based Hiring: The Long Road from Pronouncements to Practice, 2024.
[11] World Economic Forum, The Future of Jobs Report 2025: Skills outlook (chapter), 2025.

▶ 4. A proposed model for skills-based entry-level job design

This section provides a practical blueprint for those involved in the hiring process, that can be implemented and evaluated with employers and sector partners.

Step 1: Select roles and map tasks

Select three to five entry-level positions per sector where youth demand is strong and tasks are observable (e.g., junior customer support, hospitality reception, warehouse operations, basic maintenance assistant, junior accounting clerk, food processing operator). Conduct a task-mapping workshop with supervisors, experienced workers, OSH focal points, HR, and, where possible, training providers.

Output: a list of core tasks (typically 8-15), the context in which they are performed, and the minimum proficiency required.

Step 2: Convert tasks into skills profile

Translate tasks into a skills profile covering:

a. technical skills
b. core skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, reliability)
c. digital basics
d. OSH and quality routines.

Distinguish skills that are required on day one from those that can be developed in the first 4-8 weeks with support.

Step 3: Rewrite the job description and progression pathway

Replace experience levels with demonstrable requirements. For example, instead of "two years of experience in customer service", specify "can handle a simulated customer query using the service script and escalation rules". Where degrees are not essential for safe and effective task performance, treat them as optional or remove them. Publish working conditions clearly (e.g., wage range, hours, contract type, OSH expectations) and include a short learning plan tied to the skills profile.

Define a progression pathway (e.g., after six months and achievement of specified competencies, move to a higher pay step or role level).

Step 4: Align onboarding and training

As already mentioned, a core reason employers rely on experience is limited onboarding capacity. Skills-based job design therefore pairs selection reform with stronger onboarding: supervisor checklists; mentoring; short bridging modules co-designed with training providers; and recognition of prior learning (RPL) so that youth with informal experience are not forced to repeat training unnecessarily.

▶ 5. A proposed model for skills-based selection

5.1. Recommended assessment for entry-level roles

In a skills-based hiring approach for entry-level roles, the goal is to replace simple proxies (e.g., degrees, years of experience) with direct, fair evidence of capability, while ensuring the process remains aligned with decent work principles, i.e., transparency, non-discrimination, safe conditions, and no shifting of business risk onto applicants. A practical recruitment sequence can be organized into five stages. Table 2 summarizes.

▶ Table 2: A practical recruitment sequence

Stage	Purpose and decent work considerations
Minimum eligibility screen	Right to work, availability, essential safety prerequisites. Keep minimal to avoid excluding capable youth.
Structured interview (15-20 minutes)	Standard questions mapped to the skills profile; anchored rating scales; panel scoring where possible.
Work sample (30-90 minutes)	Job-relevant tasks (simulations or exercises) scored using guidelines; avoid unpaid productive work.
Realistic job preview	Briefly show typical tasks, pace, and conditions to reduce mismatch and early turnover.
Reference checks focused on behaviour	Use structured prompts that analyse reliability, teamwork, and learning, not prestige.

First, the **minimum eligibility screen** should be strictly limited to what is really essential: right to work, realistic availability, and any critical safety prerequisites (e.g., the ability to comply with OSH rules or handle basic safety equipment where required). Keeping this stage minimal matters for equity. Overly broad requirements (non-essential certificates, unnecessary flexibility, or inflated experience thresholds) can exclude capable youth before they have any chance to demonstrate skills.

Second, a **structured interview** (15–20 minutes) provides a standardized way to assess core skills (communication, problem-solving, reliability, teamwork) and job-relevant behaviours. Questions should be mapped to the position's skills profile and scored with anchored rating scales to reduce subjectivity. Where feasible, panel scoring or a second rater strengthens consistency and limits bias.

Third, the **work sample** (30–90 minutes) is the core skills-based assessment. Candidates complete realistic tasks or simulations scored with clear guidelines. From a decent work perspective, the key safeguard is to avoid unpaid productive work. The exercise should be time-bounded, job-relevant, and designed as an assessment (not a way to obtain free labour). If an assessment produces meaningful value for the employer, it should be compensated and clearly regulated.

Fourth, a **realistic job preview** improves match quality by showing typical tasks, pace, schedules, and working conditions before an offer is accepted. This strengthens transparency and reduces early turnover, particularly important for young workers who may have limited prior exposure to formal workplaces and whose first job experience strongly shapes future labour market attachment.

Finally, **reference checks focused on behaviour** should use structured prompts that probe reliability, learning orientation, and teamwork rather than "prestige". This helps prevent prior access to elite schools or employers from becoming a hidden barrier. Taken together, these stages create a recruitment process that is both more predictive of performance and more inclusive, while embedding decent work safeguards so that entry pathways remain fair and transparent.

5.2. Practical bias control

To ensure skills-based selection improves equity rather than reproducing existing exclusions, pilots should apply simple, enforceable (mostly existing) controls, such as anonymize CVs where feasible; use common guidelines and pass thresholds; train assessors; monitor selection rates by gender and other relevant characteristics (in line with national regulations); and review any digital matching tools for unequal impact.

OECD and ILO's work on public employment services and digitalization stress the importance of governance and accountability in adopting new tools for matching and service delivery.[12]

▶ 6. Evaluation: Testing whether the trap is reduced

An evidence-based approach requires more than implementation, it requires learning what works, for whom, and at what cost. ILO's work on a systematic review of interventions to improve the labour market outcomes of youth emphasises counterfactual logic and a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods.[13] Where randomization is not feasible, phased rollout or matched comparisons can still produce credible evidence.

6.1. Core outcomes and indicators

A credible test of whether skills-based job design and hiring tackles the youth experience trap requires monitoring outcomes that go beyond the number of hires. Therefore, this section proposes an outcome framework that captures the pathway from entry access to sustained, decent work, while also checking that reforms do not create new forms of exclusion.

[12] OECD, Empowering the Workforce in the Context of a Skills-First Approach, 2024; ILO, Public employment services: diagnostic tool and guide, 2021.

[13] ILO, Interventions to improve the labour market outcomes of youth: A systematic review, 2017.

The first domain, **access and speed**, measures whether the pilot is actually widening entry opportunities for young people and reducing friction in recruitment. Indicators such as youth applicant share, youth hire share, time-to-fill and time-to-hire, and drop-off rates across stages help diagnose where barriers persist. For instance, large drop-offs at the work-sample stage may signal an assessment that is too demanding, poorly explained, or not accessible.

Second, **job matching and performance** assess whether the new hiring approach improves alignment between candidates' skills and job requirements. Probation completion is a simple, practical indicator of whether hires can meet expectations with reasonable support, competency milestones rated by supervisors (using a standardized guideline) provide a more detailed view of skills acquisition during onboarding, and objective performance metrics, where available and ethically used, help validate whether assessments predict real outcomes.

Third, **retention and progression** focus on whether entry leads to sustained employment and advancement rather than short, unstable spells. Tracking 3/6/12-month retention, wage progression, and movement to the next competency level helps distinguish "access" from "quality entry with a future".

Because the ILO lens is decent work, the fourth domain, **job quality and protection**, checks whether the jobs offered meet basic standards and whether new hiring pathways are paired with adequate safeguards. Contract type, hours stability, OSH incidents, access to training, and the presence and use of grievance mechanisms ensure that inclusion is not achieved through precarious work or weakened protections.

Finally, **equity** indicators are essential. Selection and hiring gaps by gender and other priority groups, pay equality for comparable work, and the availability of accommodations or adjustments provide an early warning system for unintended bias. Together, these domains create a balanced results picture, showing not only whether more young people enter jobs, but whether they enter decent jobs, remain, and progress.

► **Table 3: Outcomes and indicators**

Outcome domain	Example indicators
Access and speed	Youth applicants share; youth hire share; time-to-fill; time-to-hire; drop-off rates across recruitment stages.
Job matching and performance	Probation completion; supervisor-rated competency milestones; objective performance metrics where available.
Retention and progression	3/6/12-month retention; wage progression; movement to the next competency level.
Job quality and protection	Contract type; hours stability; OSH incidents; access to training; grievance mechanisms.
Equity	Selection and hiring gaps by gender and other priority groups; pay parity; accommodations pr adjustments and inclusion measures.

6.2. Suggested evaluation designs

Three evaluation options are realistic for pilots with employers:

1. randomized rollout by site or hiring cohort, producing the strongest causal evidence
2. stepped wedge (phased) adoption, where all sites eventually adopt but the order is randomized
3. matched comparison, pairing treated positions/firms with similar positions/firms that retain standard hiring.

In all cases, combine administrative recruitment data with worker surveys and qualitative interviews to capture job quality, perceived fairness, and supervisor capacity.

▶ 7. Case studies: ILO evidence-based practice that informs skills-based entry pathways

7.1. Tunisia: STED sector strategies linking employer demand, training content and entry pathways[14]

Tunisia has invested heavily in education and faces persistent skills mismatch and difficult school-to-work transitions, including high unemployment among educated youth in some periods.

The ILO's Skills for Trade and Economic Diversification (STED) methodology is a sector-focused process that aligns skills development strategies with sectoral growth and employment potential. The STED programme supports growth and decent employment creation in sectors with export and diversification potential.

ILO STED country resources indicate support to design sector skills strategies for two sectors (metallurgy and construction) and to implement selected recommendations to close identified skills gaps.

STED-type sector strategies have helped Tunisia identify realistic entry points in value chains, specify the tasks that employers actually need, and adapt training and placement pathways accordingly. This makes it easier to design skills-based hiring assessments and to connect youth to jobs that match their competencies. Some of the transferable design lessons include:

(i) start with sectors where tasks can be observed and assessed;
(ii) co-design work samples with employers;
(iii) update skills profiles with labour market information;
(iv) link entry hiring to progression and continuing learning.

7.2. Tanzania: Quality apprenticeships and recognition of prior learning (RPL) as a bridge into first jobs

Tanzania has sought to strengthen pathways from training to work, including for young people whose skills are acquired through informal apprenticeships or work experience that is not formally recognized.

The ILO supported the government and social partners in Tanzania though development cooperation projects[15] on implementing and strengthening quality apprenticeship. The objective has been to support the development of TVET policy, develop an informal apprenticeship policy, pilot a formal apprenticeship programme in the hospitality sector, and pilot recognition of prior learning to ease young people's access to their first job.

Globally, ILO constituents adopted an International Labour Standard in 2023 on Quality Apprenticeships: Recommendation 208. Apprenticeships are a structured way to turn "no experience" into paid, supervised experience with defined learning outcomes and social partner oversight. When coupled with RPL, it helps make existing skills legible and portable.

7.3. Bangladesh. Skills 21 and recognition of prior learning as a practical "skills signal" for entry pathways

In Bangladesh, the ILO's Skills 21 project[16] is a good example of evidence-informed work that tries to make skills more legible at the point of labour market entry. The project was designed to strengthen an inclusive TVET system aligned with labour market demand, and it explicitly combined training reform with assessment and certification mechanisms that employers can recognize. The ILO reports that 6,791 youth completed certificate courses and that 49 per cent of those trained joined the labour force, alongside a large investment in training and certifying trainers and assessors.

What is particularly relevant for a skills-based entry pathways argument is the emphasis on recognition of prior learning (RPL) and competency-based assessment. Skills 21 reports 3,595 industry workers certified through the RPL system, which is essentially a way of converting informal or non-formal learning into a recognized signal that can substitute for years of experience in recruitment. In

[14] ILO, Compétences pour le Commerce et la Diversification Économique (STED) en Tunisie.

[15] ILO, SKILL-UP Tanzania; ILO, Implementing and strengthening quality apprenticeship in Tanzania.

[16] ILO, Skills 21 – Empowering citizens for inclusive and sustainable growth.

practical terms, this kind of certification does not create jobs, but it does reduce one of the core frictions behind the experience trap, i.e., employers' tendency to use credentials and tenure as proxies because skills are hard to verify.

7.4. Ethiopia. SKILL-UP support to build a national RPL framework that formalizes skills gained outside formal jobs

Ethiopia's SKILL-UP programme offers another relevant pathway, especially in contexts where a large share of young people builds competencies through informal work, family enterprises, or irregular employment that does not count as experience in formal hiring. Under SKILL-UP, the ILO supported the Government to strengthen a more market-driven and inclusive skills system, with a strong focus on making skills measurable and portable.

A concrete output is the development of a national RPL approach for the TVET system, aimed at giving skilled, but unqualified, workers a route to obtain full or partial national qualifications without having to restart training from zero. This is directly aligned with skills-based entry hiring, because it produces a validated skills signal that can be used in recruitment and progression decisions. The policy momentum is also documented in ILO reporting on Ethiopia's national RPL guideline launch in 2024,[17] which framed RPL as a mechanism to formalize informally acquired skills and broaden access to recognized qualifications and consequently to decent jobs.

▶ 8. Implementation roadmap for an ILO-supported pilot

Considering the above, this brief also intends to propose an implementation roadmap for a pilot that the ILO would support. A typical pilot can be delivered in 18-24 months and scaled through sector partnerships.

Phase A – Design and planning (3 months)

Select two sectors and 10-20 employers (or public sector agencies) with recurring entry-level hiring needs. Establish a tripartite advisory group or social dialogue mechanism for oversight.

Collect baseline data: current job requirements, screening rules, youth applicant and hire shares, time-to-fill, probation failure, and early turnover. Co-design skills profiles, assessment rubrics, and onboarding plans for a small set of roles.

Phase B - Implementation (12-16 months)

Run redesigned hiring cycles for the selected roles. Train hiring managers and supervisors on structured interviews and categories. Implement work sample assessments and realistic job previews. Provide short bridging modules through TVET/PES partners and assign mentors for the first 4-8 weeks. Monitor process-data monthly and adjust where evidence shows bottlenecks or equity concerns.

Phase C - Evaluation and scale (3-5 months)

Conduct the agreed evaluation (randomised, phased, or matched). Compare outcomes with baseline or comparison groups. Document implementation lessons and unit costs. Produce a scale toolkit, which includes job design templates, assessment tools, supervisor coaching guides, and a monitoring dashboard. Engage sector bodies and social partners to institutionalise the approach, including credential recognition and RPL where relevant.

▶ 9. Policy and partnership recommendations

9.1. For governments and social partners

Use tripartite channels, social dialogue and meaningful youth engagement[18] to define the needs and match the demand and supply sides of the labour market. Promote competency

[17] ILO, Recognition of prior learning in Ethiopia, 2024.

[18] ILO, Meaningful youth engagement for decent work: A training package on engaging young people in employment programmes, 2024.

frameworks and recognition of prior learning to make skills visible. Expand quality apprenticeships and protect decent work conditions using established guidance and tools, such as Recommendation 208, 2023. Use public sector recruitment and public procurement as a demonstration platform for skills-based hiring and inclusive entry pathways.

9.2. For employers

Shift from ad-level commitments to operational change. For instance, adopt structured selection, invest in supervisor onboarding capability, and align incentives with retention and progression, not just time-to-hire. Publish clear job quality information and ensure assessments are fair, job-relevant, and proportionate.

9.3. For PES and training institutions

Translate vacancy information into modular training aligned to task profiles. Strengthen career guidance and matching. Use RPL to recognize informal experience and support pathways into formal employment.

▶ 10. Conclusions

Breaking the youth experience trap requires changing how "entry-level" is defined and how readiness is assessed. Skills-based job design and hiring offers a concrete lever which makes capability measurable and reduces reliance on proxies that exclude young people.

The international evidence suggests this shift can widen access and improve matching, but only when employers reform assessment, onboarding, and incentives.

ILO experience with quality apprenticeship strengthening and sectoral skills strategies underscores that sustainable change is most likely when transitions are structured, quality is safeguarded, and learning is connected to real entry points in labour markets. This, in turn, highlights the importance creating decent jobs, and ensuring that young people can effectively access them.

Finally, including youth in the processes allow social partners to work with and for youth, putting into practice meaningful youth engagement for promoting decent work and social justice.

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ILO. *Breaking the youth experience trap: Hiring for entry-level jobs: substituting experience and testing skills-based job design*, ILO brief, Geneva: International Labour Office, 2026. © ILO. https://doi.org/10.54394/00035654

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.54394/00035654