

Youth employment in the private sector: Experiences & lessons learned

Case #1: Luka*

Luka is a 23 year old orphan and former street child. Born in Arusha in 1982, he began schooling at Azimio Primary School in 1992 but dropped out in 1994 because his mother could no longer pay for his school costs. His father had already passed away by this time, and his mother struggled for years to make ends meet for Luka and his younger brother. In 1994, however, Luka's mother fell ill, and she continued to suffer from poor health until her death in 1999. During his mother's illness, Luka began to visit the streets during the day - begging and doing small jobs to make some money - but he always returned home at night. Eventually, Luka became accustomed to street life and left his home permanently in 1995.

After three years on the street full-time, Luka encountered an NGO who took him into their residential centre for street children. While at the centre, Luka was sponsored to attend vocational school where he completed his Grade III Motor Vehicle Mechanics course in September 2001. He worked briefly at a garage apprenticeship, but soon left this unpaid position because he had difficulty meeting basic needs such as food and shelter. Luka returned to the streets in June 2002, where he continued to struggle. Eventually he went to the Mererani Tanzanite mines, but the work conditions there were extremely harsh, and he returned to Arusha after just a few weeks.

Mkombozi found Luka through a street-based feeding program in August 2002. From the outset, Luka was a respectful youth who appeared quite keen to change his lifestyle. He assisted volunteers and staff at the feeding program by performing odd tasks and maintaining order during meals. In fact, Luka's peers elected him as their "representative" - he attended meetings with Mkombozi staff and volunteers to provide input from the children's perspective and also to provide feedback to the children about project activities.

In 2003, Mkombozi linked Luka to Imbaseni Vocational School where he completed his Grade II Motor Vehicle Mechanics course. While studying, Luka lived in a rented room with a friend. Mkombozi paid for his living expenses and a social worker visited frequently to provide support and guidance. At this time, Luka was also actively involved in Arts, Drama, Computer lessons and English classes in the evenings and on weekends. Such extra-curricular activity helped Luka to remain focussed and to further develop his skills and self esteem. When Luka finished his Grade II course in December, he requested the opportunity to gain practical experience. So, Mkombozi found an apprenticeship for Luka with a private tour company, and he began work as a mechanic. Just six months later, Luka was formally hired by the tour company. Today, after almost a year of employment, Luka still works at the tour company, and his colleagues hold him in high regard.

Luka currently lives independently. After work, he attends Spanish classes to further develop himself and his skills. Ultimately, Luka hopes to continue with his studies, and to complete his Grade 1 Mechanics course.



Case #2: Joseph, Rashidi, Peter, Juma & Alphonse*

Joseph, Rashidi, Peter, Juma and Alphonse have all lived as street youth for varying durations. Before starting work with a private garbage collection project called YEP in May 2003, Mkombozi provided the youth with business training as preparation for steady employment. The training included information on how businesses function and succeed, what needs to be considered before starting a business and how to maintain a business. Although the youth found the training beneficial, they felt the content was too theoretical and did not address the life skills and workplace skills that they required. Notably however, the training sessions did provide the youth with the opportunity to develop responsibility and self-discipline through regular attendance, punctuality, and abstaining from substance use during the sessions.

YEP was, in fact, a new project established by inexperienced youth, many of whom had not completed primary or secondary school. Unfortunately, except for the initial business training, very little capacity building was done with respect to the details of running a business, budgeting and problem-solving. Moreover, garbage collection was suddenly privatised by the Municipality, and local Government failed to fulfill its promises to small contractors who tendered for the work. As a result, YEP incurred additional expenses, and people refused to pay for their services. With little available recourse to collect dues, YEP persevered and struggled to make ends meet - but staff were often unpaid, or were paid less than promised. Not surprisingly, the YEP work environment was tense, morale was low, resources and infrastructure were lacking, and staff often worked without basic equipment and protective gear.

When Joseph, Rashidi, Peter, Juma and Alphonse began work, the Mkombozi social worker assisted them to find rooms to rent, and bought some food for them until they received their first pay. Regular follow up was done by the social worker, and often this involved mediating conflict between the youth and encouraging the boys to remain motivated and committed to YEP. Unfortunately, as YEP's business situation continued to deteriorate, Peter and Juma quit. Joseph, Rashidi and Alphonse continued for another year and a half with YEP, but all eventually quit or were fired. Mkombozi believes that the youth were successful with respect to the durations they remained with YEP - commendable for former street youth with no previous work experience.

Lessons learned ...

- ① It is not enough to link youth to employment - preparation for work and intensive, on-going support are both critical factors for success.
- ② It is necessary to dedicate social work staff to the management of youth in employment, so that adequate time and support can be provided to assist them while they transition to independent living. In particular, time and effort must be spent ensuring that youth are budgeting their money, regularly attending work, behaving and performing at the workplace, and managing conflicts and problems with colleagues and supervisors.
- ③ The social worker and the youth should work together to increase the youths' attachment to positive role models and build his/her self esteem through extra curricular activities and sports. Transitioning youth need exposure to new lifestyle choices, a new peer group, and new life skills.
- ④ Time and training must be devoted to building the youth's capacity to cope with structure, discipline, the workplace, and the "real world". Providing them with skills in conflict resolution and problem solving is necessary to help them cope rather than react in dysfunctional or habitual ways, such as substance use. Use of substances hinders the youth's ability to hold down a job, to budget, and to save money.
- ⑤ Short-term, part-time and trial work opportunities may be a good way to prepare youth for more permanent employment and a means to assess if the youth will cope effectively and/or require additional support.
- ⑥ Youth morale, motivation and job satisfaction is enhanced by employment that is challenging and personally interesting for the youth him/herself - as seen in Luka's case. Casual labour, and low-paying, physically demanding positions will ultimately result in frustration and disinterest.
- ⑦ It is important to work closely with the employers and supervisors so they understand the unique situations and histories of street youth, and to ensure they work against community prejudices and stereotypes, and against labelling, accusing or marginalisation of the children.
- ⑧ No matter how much a social worker motivates the youth to succeed, the youth's internal drive and determination are the critical factors that ultimately determine sustained, positive progress.