The Young and the Restless: Remote Work Environments and Emerging Adults

The outcomes of COVID-19 on office work environments in Ottawa, and the impact on the emerging adults employed within.

A thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Anthropology

By Amanda Engineer

Under the supervision of Karine Vanthuyne

School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Ottawa

Note:

This thesis submission is untraditional in its submission. This written document is an Annex Anthology to be considered in conjunction with the pre-recorded presentation available as a supplementary PowerPoint file included in the thesis repository item, titled “AEngineer - MA Thesis - Young and Restless - Remote Work Environments and Emerging adults - Deck w Video Commentary”.

Table of Contents

Abstract

The labour market in Ottawa has a heavy presence of government roles at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. Ottawa is a business hub for organizations and private practices that work with or in conjunction to government offices. As such, office work environments are prevalent in Canada's capital, and there is culture that encourages young graduates and labour-market entrants to seek office work for the security it offers. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the labour market in Canada and resulted in the implementation of a remote-work directive, as well as the creation of new jobs in fields that were largely remote. This thesis critically examines how the shift to remote work impacted office workers in the emerging adulthood stage of life and tries to understand ways that 'youth' as an identity category is embodied through their experiences. I argue that emerging adults that work in offices through the remote and hybrid work environment have had to become technical and professional mentors to their colleagues, while experiencing a disruption in skill development necessary for professional growth. I further show the implications of these experiences on the subjectivities of these young employees by engaging in formal and informal dialogue with them.

Acknowledgements

In the last two years of my academic career, there has been tension between me and my feelings as an ‘anthropologist’. To me, anthropology—as a ‘scientific study of humanity’—should be for everyone. The best part about being a contemporary anthropologist is getting to look at what seem like ordinary things/times/experiences and philosophize about them in the pursuit of knowledge and education. It’s awesome, and I love doing it.

The study of humanity will only ever be understood from a human perspective. In this regard, we are all anthropologists: in the way that we know things, and in the way we are aware. Sometimes, I feel as though ‘doing anthropology’ is another way of saying ‘putting words to thoughts about why something is occurring’, and then seeking the academic credit for putting pen to paper. The retelling of a subject’s story from a particular perspective and making connections to other works is often ‘anthropology at work’ and can lack acknowledgement for the starring subject(s). In the context of this research, the subject was already fascinating. All I did was my best effort at representing it. If I am to be an anthropologist, then I will be a humble anthropologist, and must acknowledge that the only thing I do is look, think, read, think again, and externalize the outcome (pen to paper, voice to ear, however it may be).

To me, pursuing anthropology is being aware that you’re doing analysis using prescriptive, observational thinking, based on the consideration of data points. However, it feels like my analysis is always taunted with the knowledge that I will never be able to actively consider more than a fraction of all potential data points—because *those* can be *anything,* depending on what you are trying to investigate.

This is all to say that I think the public should be able to hear about what we are researching/analyzing and understand it. Our writings should be digestible to the public. I extend my thanks to the friends and family that listened to me talk through my thoughts and let me know when I lost them. A big thank you to Bri, who encouraged me every day. Your efforts help me keep my work accessible, and that is what I care about most.

Annex 1: Historical Situating

National Capital Region (NCR) Labour Market and the COVID-19 Pandemic

On January 25, 2020, Canada announced its first confirmed case of the COVID-19 virus. Life continued as normal, and though there was news and speculation about the virus, there was not much change to daily life. March brought the first cases of community-spread infection, and within the same month the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared that the global spread of the virus had been re-classified from an epidemic to a pandemic (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2022).

The week of March 10, 2020, approximately 148 new cases were reported. The Government of Canada issued a recommendation to implement work-from-home policies, and the first guidelines on social isolation were published. Businesses were being classified as either essential or non-essential, and legislated regulations were developed to inform business operations during the pandemic. Non-essential businesses were required to close to the public and were given strict guidelines on allowed operations (i.e., businesses were allowed to operate if they followed distancing requirements, to run security measures, etc. however businesses were not allowed to service customers onsite). As a result of the sudden closure of businesses, there was an unprecedented spike in Canadian unemployment rates (Wang, 2022).

In alignment with physical distancing guidelines, many bureaucratic and corporate offices across Canada, including that of the federal department I worked for at the time, implemented directives for employees to work from home (Deng et. al, 2020).

COVID-19 placed the Ottawa-Gatineau metropolitan – Canada's National Capital Region (NCR) – in a unique position; on one hand, employment was precarious, and

unemployment was increasing across the country. However, on the other hand, the Canadian federal public service grew by about 57,000 employees between 2020 and 2023 (Treasury Board Secretariat, 2022). This growth would impact Canada's national capital region's labour market.

The NCR is a hub for office work. In 2021, there were 319,601 active employees in the federal public service, representing approximately 0.84% of the Canadian population. Of these 319,601 employees, 42.2% were in the NCR (Treasury Board Secretariat, 2024). Further, according to the 2021 Census, the Ottawa-Gatineau metropolitan area had a population of approximately 1,488,307 people (Statistics Canada, 2023). In short, federal public servants represent approximately 9.1% of the NCR's population in total, and approximately 13.7% of the NCR's working working-age population (aged 15-64 years old) (Treasury Board Secretariat, 2022). Beyond federal public servants, there are municipal and provincial government offices housed in NCR, as well as private sector businesses and non-for-profit organizations attracted to the capital to do business with government agencies and other private organizations.

The tension between business closures, unemployment, and office-environment employment during the pandemic was significant. In my experience, there was an existing culture in Ottawa that pedestaled employment within the public services as a secure path to financial independence. Within the context of the pandemic, I found the rhetoric around seeking governmental employment as a means for financial security increased significantly. Many of my friends transitioned to office-based jobs during this time, if not in government, then within the private sector. People I knew (and sometimes those I didn't

know!) would find out that I worked for the federal government, give me a terse nod, and congratulate me for pursuing the 'smart route'[1].

Though remote work or working from home (WFH) is not a novel concept or practice, a mass transition to teleworking across various sectors (including financial, educational, corporate, etc.) for Canadians was, prior to the pandemic, unprecedented. With respect to how many NCR inhabitants work in office environments, a massive portion of labourers transitioned to working from home, including myself. Statistics Canada's *March 2020 Perspectives Survey Series*' analysis on COVID-19's impact on job security found that in the last week of March 2020, approximately twelve days after the declaration of the 'pandemic' status of the virus, 39.1% of Canadian workers were teleworking (Statistics Canada, 2020*).

In June 2020, Statistics Canada released a second analytical product that found that the pandemic may encourage businesses to apply technological tools to 'virus proof' their operations in conjunction with moving their sales and customer services to online platforms, in order to continue offering accessible service while quarantines were mandated. These practices lead to increased reliance on digital technology (Statistics Canada, 2020**).

[1] Alternatively, they would ask me for advice on how to 'get in' or ask if they could send me their resume. In the last four years, I have connected more than ten people to opportunities within the public service, and three continue to work within the federal government.

Annex 2: Transition to the remote workspace

Vignette - Spring/Summer 2020

Era: Remote

Office Status: 100% Virtual

Status of COVID-19: Officially a Pandemic

In Spring 2019, when I first began working in an office full time, I remember talking to a colleague who told me that when she accepted her job with my department, her family agreed to relocate for the position. I remarked how considerate that was of her partner, who was also working full time. She shared with me that her husband's department agreed for him to work remotely and had signed a telework agreement. From then on, there were many moments when I wished to be brave enough to approach my manager and ask her if I could also have a telework agreement. After all, I wasn't very busy; I could fill my free time at work completing mandatory training modules (and occasionally optional training modules), volunteering for corporate committees, or organizing fun events for my team to engage in. I was completing my work ahead of deadlines, completing tasks that I was optionally taking on, and *still* I had significant amounts of time to spend reading at my desk, or listening to music while scrolling mindlessly on the computer. I used to fantasize how I would spend my free time if I had a telework agreement and could occasionally work from home, but I never approached my manager to discuss it as I knew that they were given out sparingly (and honestly, I wanted one to work outside of supervising eyes).

Telework agreements are contracts that give permission to an employee to work remotely, and prior to the pandemic they were given out based on a manager's discretion for exceptional circumstances. As such, they were tough to secure. None of the people that I worked with closely had one, nor had been successful in broaching the topic with their management. Of all the office workers I knew, only a couple of them ever worked from home.

When March 16, 2020, rolled around and office workers across Canada were sent home with their laptops and the direction to await future direction, I was sincerely excited, despite the anxiety of change and threat of global illness. Management was not sure how long the remote work directive would need to be in place; a week, maybe two or three. It also seemed like no one, including management, knew how a mass remote work force was going to operate, but they did know that it was the only possibility beyond asking their employees to continue coming into the office and risk contracting the deadly and highly transmissible virus.

Though COVID-19 had been officially declared as a global pandemic, and the country was amidst a time of mass uncertainty and stress, I was feeling neither of these in great magnitude in relation to my job. My position was secure until January 2021, and my team was comprised of 2.5 people. In short, I felt essential to the team.

At the onset of the remote work mandate, I was working on a team that specialized in external stakeholder relations and engagement. Many of the files that I was working on were paused indefinitely, as travel was frowned upon, and meeting up with those who had been travelling was even more taboo.

The federal government was unprepared to shift to a virtual workforce overnight. The wi-fi and internet connection in office spaces prior to the pandemic were private networks that supported cyber-security measures and firewall to protect people accessing the server for the floor/building. An individual's home wi-fi was not up to security standards so there was a government Virtual Private Network (VPN) that employees would connect to for increased security. While using the VPN they could access files stored on the organizational shared workspace, as well as access basic platforms like Outlook for emails.

While adjusting to the WFH order, I learned that telework agreements that were hard to procure were difficult to procure in part because they required the department to make sure that there was available capacity within the VPN. When the workforce became fully remote, there was an extreme shortage of licenses to access the VPN connection, and the direction was for people to avoid connecting to the VPN unless it was necessary. This would save room in the limited availability for 'priority employees' to access the appropriate secured networks. As mentioned above, the email software we used in my office required a VPN connection to work – without a connection, the inbox could not be synched, and new emails would not appear.

Thus, until my organization could provide direction or procure more licenses, I was in an indefinite state of suspension. I was feeling confident that I was not going to lose my job, even though I was the entry level employee on my team. All my files were paused; my to-do list disappeared overnight. I could not reliably check my emails without taking away connection from a priority employee, and until my manager could provide direction, I had (literally) nothing to work on. The only function of my work computer that worked

without connection to the VPN was the general internet (no access to protected internal organizational material), and a Skype instant messaging software that had been installed prior to WFH, for casual instant messaging with our colleagues. So, for the first week of the Remote Era, I logged into work, sent everyone a Skype message, and waited around my computer. I read books, watched movies, and continued to wait for further direction.

The first week passed. Then the second, then the third. There were no significant changes to my work. It became clear that while it was uncertain how long the global pandemic status would last, the situation was not improving. Workers could expect to stay remote a while longer. Again, I was excited. I'd think *Wow, I needed to get more books. Or, at a minimum, some type of home-bound hobby*.

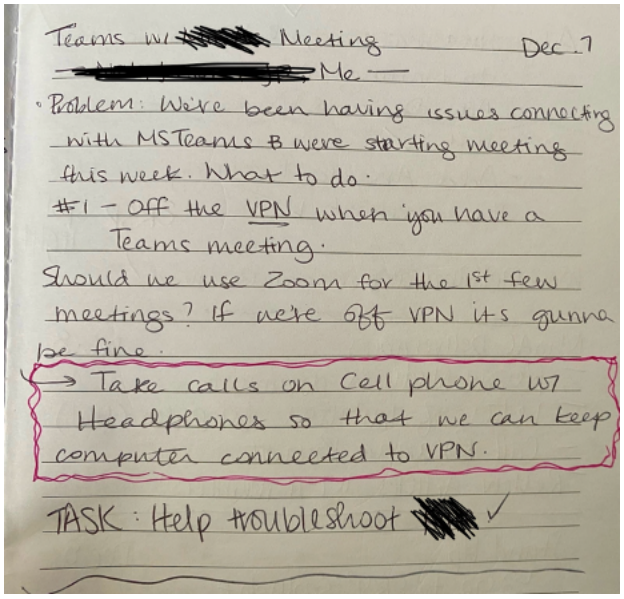
Prior to the transition to the remote workspace, my manager often told others that she *was "allergic to technology"*, and honestly, it really did feel like she was telling the truth. She was not good at using her computer. If a colleague asked her for advice about a tech issue, she would tell them to come and ask me. She'd say that "*Amanda was where she turned to problem-solve 'techy-things'"*. Without pause, the reciprocated response would almost always include a comment about my age, and its link to my 'technological proficiency'[2].

While working virtually, answering questions about computer operation became a main role for me. I was often 'in-demand' to provide insights, solutions and respond to concerns that pertained to the use of a computer and its relevant software and programs. Though I do not mark myself as significantly proficient in computer-related activities, it

[2] Not that I consider myself to be particularly proficient in tech, but they didn't know the difference. "Thank God for young people and their computers!"

became quickly apparent that of my direct network of colleagues, I was one of the more helpful and knowledgeable 'tech wizards' around[3].

For example, since meetings with external partners were still largely paused, my team was newly appointed to plan, coordinate, implement, and act as secretariate to a committee that developed recommendations for a high-ranking executive. Much of the work involved in this process for me was to recommend options for meeting platforms, helping candidates with technical issues in the submission of their applications, and upon the implementation of the committee, helping participants with their virtual set up. Despite this, I was still feeling underworked, and was struggling to keep myself engaged; my manager was not receptive to increasing my responsibilities or coaching me in developing the skills to complete tasks that were above-level. In all, she was not receptive to me expanding my skill set beyond the use of digital tools.



[3] If there were ever a time that I didn't know how to solve a problem (which was often), I did know how to use Google.

Figure 1. An excerpt of my notes, December 2020, in which technical problems are described and I am tasked to help others solve technical problems. Sensitive information redacted.

I ran out of training modules to complete, and I ran out of books to read. The fun, volunteer corporate activities that I participated in while working in-office had halted in March, and instead of starting back up they were replaced by a committee that focused on transitioning the Branch to virtual work.

I was asked to participate in a small working group tasked with organizing and delivering these “work retreats” in the first few months of the pandemic. These working retreats focused on subject matter such as ‘what does each team do’, ‘how do we work together’ and ‘how to manage and care for our physical and mental health during the ongoing pandemic’. To accomplish these retreats, I had to talk with my colleagues about the situation we had all found ourselves navigating, and the struggles that we were facing as a result of it.

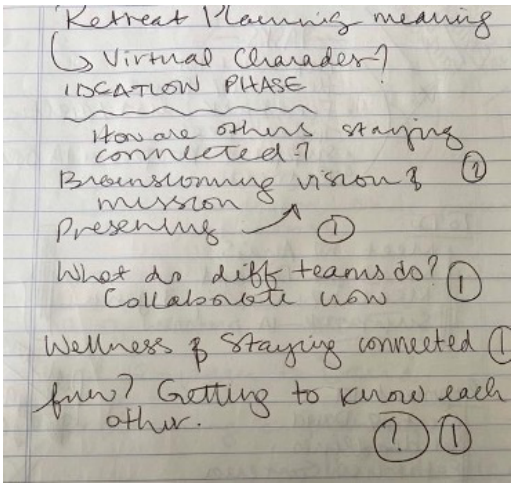


Figure 2. Notes from a virtual retreat planning meeting, June 2020

Interpersonal communication methods in remote workspaces

There were communication issues that arose while workers were trying to organize themselves in the absence of an organizational-wide work platform. Office workers became quickly overwhelmed with trying to learn how to be a “virtual employee” (i.e., how to complete 100% of their tasks using online tools). For many weeks, a main struggle in the ‘how to be virtual’ world was related to accomplishing basic tasks using unapproved software. Teams were organizing and communicating amongst themselves as they tried to figure out what to do. For example, my manager was reaching out to me using Facebook Messenger to check in with me. Our team tried a variety of common virtual platforms (e.g., Skype and Slack) to communicate with one another. Similarly, other teams were figuring out how to talk to each other. This made inter-team communication difficult, as no one really knew on which platform each team was using to communicate with one another.

Weeks became months, and logistical issues in the ‘office’ began to get sorted out, one by one. More licenses were acquired for the VPN, new priorities got sent down in lieu of the ever-paused stakeholder relation files. After gaining security approval, the federal government implemented a standardized version of Microsoft Teams as the new virtual workspace platform. I was excited to engage in this new workspace as much as possible, though it was difficult as the flow of work was often slow. My to-do list never filled up. Items landed on it, here and there, but I began to face the same issues as I did while working in person.

Workloads and departmental priorities were re-evaluated following the shift to virtual work, and as a result, colleagues were getting moved around, and placed

temporarily on new files, or teams they did not know. While working from home, if you did not have a task-related reason to reach out to another colleague, staying in touch and keeping social became a difficult accomplishment. Even when you did have a relevant reason to keep in touch, many people were no longer in the positions you were familiar with, and finding their new contact information took intentional time, effort, and focus.

Many of my colleagues that were in their positions prior to working from home, including myself, were used to an environment where they were able to socialize with their entire office or their entire floor, as they chose. Suddenly, we were limited to talking with only our immediate teams. In the early days of working in the pandemic, this was often a complaint I heard from my colleagues. In the office, people come to learn your face, and you are (often) able to have lots of little, casual conversations with your colleagues, on both personal and professional planes. While WFH, it no longer becomes 'casual' to chat with a peer; conversation was no longer convenient in the way it was when you could stop in at someone's cubicle on the way back to your desk.

Following the directive to work on MS Teams, it became more possible to talk with other colleagues, however networking from home remained difficult. During this phase of early transition, I was made acutely aware of how others were feeling about the virtual workspace, notably through running the virtual retreat series.

I found that during the remote work era, forming new connections with other teams and sectors, as well as different departments or organizations, was hard to accomplish, due to both changes in personnel and the isolation of the virtual workplace. Many colleagues that I spoke with shared similar feelings, as well as the participants I interviewed.

Being a virtual worker is very isolating. As an entry-level, young worker, I was not in a position that required consultation from others outside my team. Many people chose not to use their cameras in virtual calls, and for a long time, the platforms we were using to communicate did not include closed captioning as an accessibility setting. As I often use closed captioning as an accommodation, this meant that I would rarely hear from colleagues that were not directly working with me, was unable to see many people, and in large meeting settings, I often missed some the content of the calls. Though it was nice that I could read a book at my desk without fear of missing a deadline, I was mostly motivated to read to combat the boredom that came with being isolated in my post.

A direct impact of a virtual communication platform is a limitation in using tone and/or body language to help interpret directions. The things that people do and say, the way they act, how they prioritize their work or communicate with me vary, and those variances (such as their tone or the words they chose to use) impact how I interpret the meaning of their actions. In the absence of in-person conversation, I felt significantly less confident in communicating with my colleagues and understanding them compared to how I felt while in the office physically.

To mitigate the insecurities that I developed as a result of isolation and communication issues, I began to withdraw slightly, taking less opportunities to optionally or informally speak with colleagues. This also impacted my ability to network and to develop my skills.

However, despite video calling impacting my communication, I experienced a steep incline in the number of meetings I had to attend, as video calling replaced casual side-of-the-desk discussion. Conversely, the number of meetings with clients and folks

external to my team declined. I noticed that as I was a junior employee, I was left off a majority of these meetings; they became more exclusive, to reduce the possibility of tech issues[4] and save time by avoiding the need to do a round of introductions or spend time answering contextual questions.

Communication from my department, other departments, and direction from Treasury Board for all federal public servants was also inconsistent and/or confusing as a result of the pandemic. Conversations about the return to office (RTO) began in early 2022. As was common in my place of work, news had a way of trickling down from higher up, without official direction to follow. For the first few months of spring, my colleagues and I heard rumours, likely coming out of senior management's preparatory discussions on RTO, about the intent to return to office.

Official directives came in the spring and summer months; starting in September, folks would be expected to begin returning to their offices once a week if they felt physically healthy. This was not the direction some of my friends (who worked for other governmental departments) had received. This directive continued to change as the months went on, and by spring of 2023, all employees were mandated to have signed teleworking agreements, that reflected a 2-day per week in-person attendance. Direction then settled into the expectation that employees would spend 40-60% of their work weeks in-person at their designated offices, monthly.

[4] [4]i.e., to reduce the time spent waiting for everyone to connect and getting folks to mute themselves.

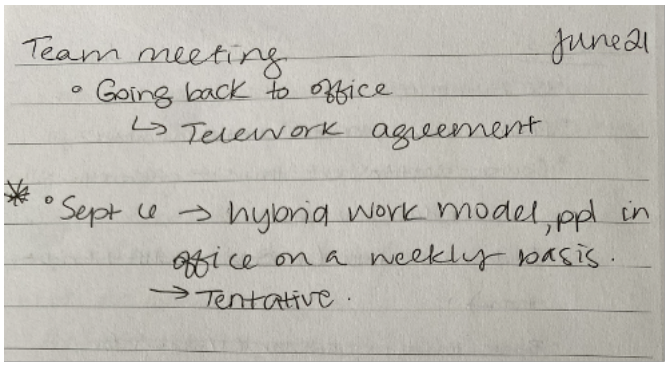
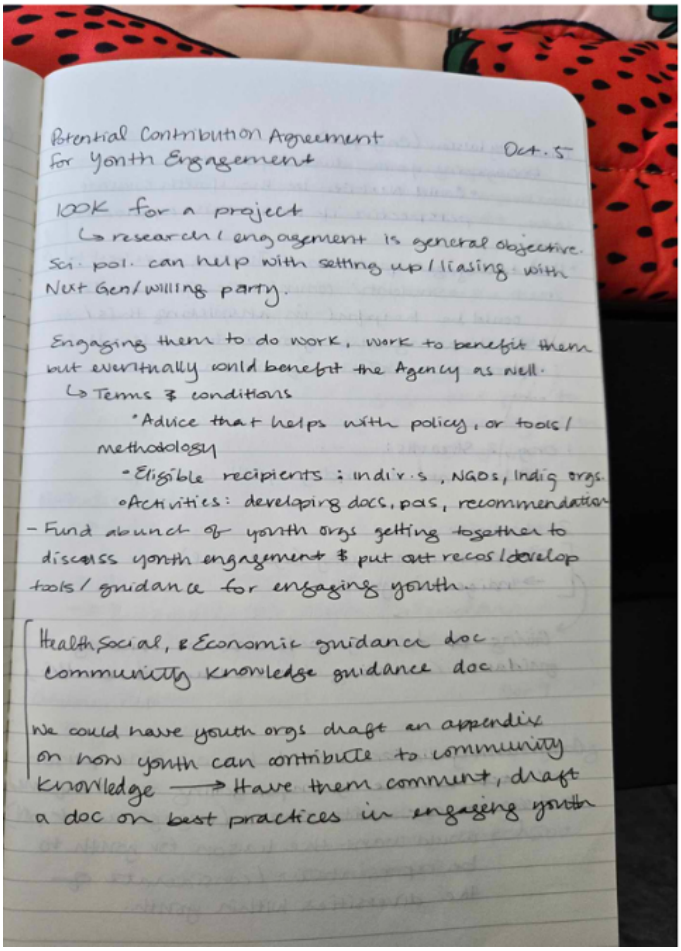


Figure 3. A note on the upcoming directive to move to hybrid work environment, June 21, 2022

Annex 3: Fieldwork Journal

fieldwork journal

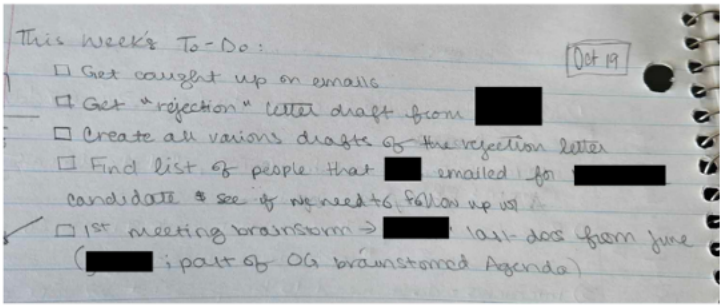
WORK TASKS - PRE-COVID EXAMPLE

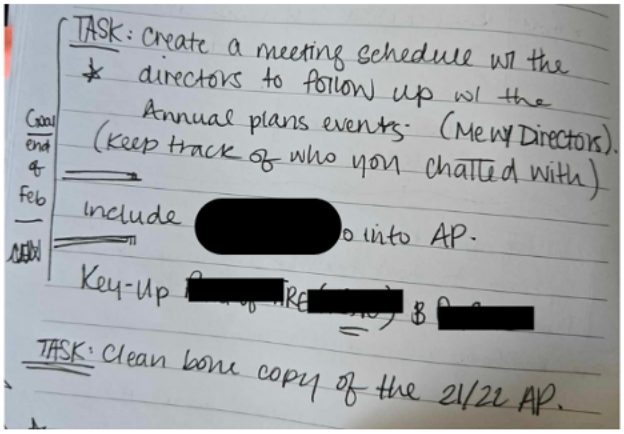


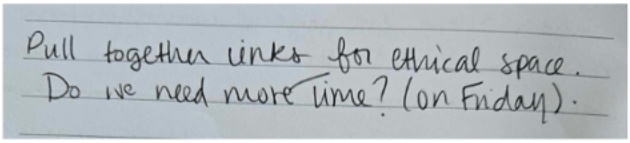
- strategic planning
- engagement-focused
- drafting high-level documents
- engaging with prior policy-focused work and learning best practice

fieldwork journal

WORK TASKS - IN COVID EXAMPLES





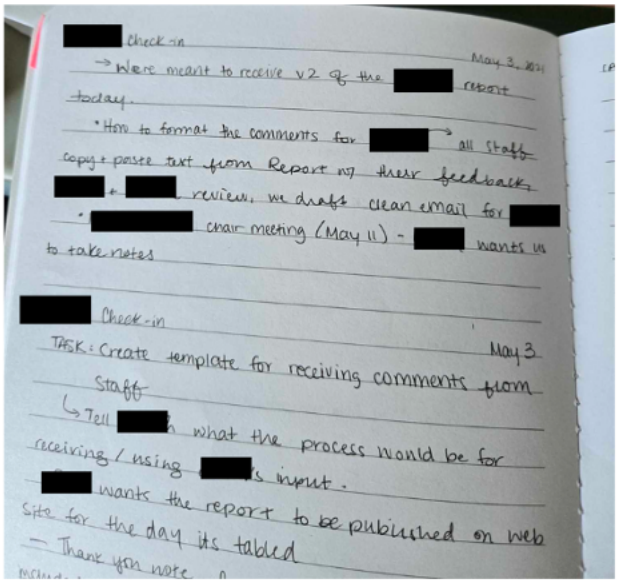


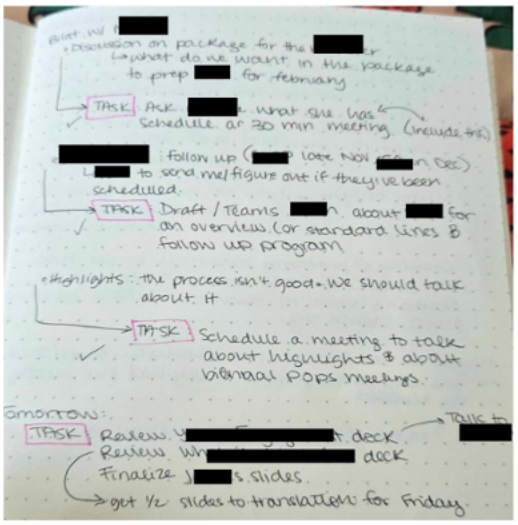
- **administrative tasks**
- **tasks become more coordination-oriented**
- **logistical**

fieldwork journal

WORK TASKS - IN COVID EXAMPLES

- **drafting templates/ schedules**
- **messaging others**
- **developing digital supports**

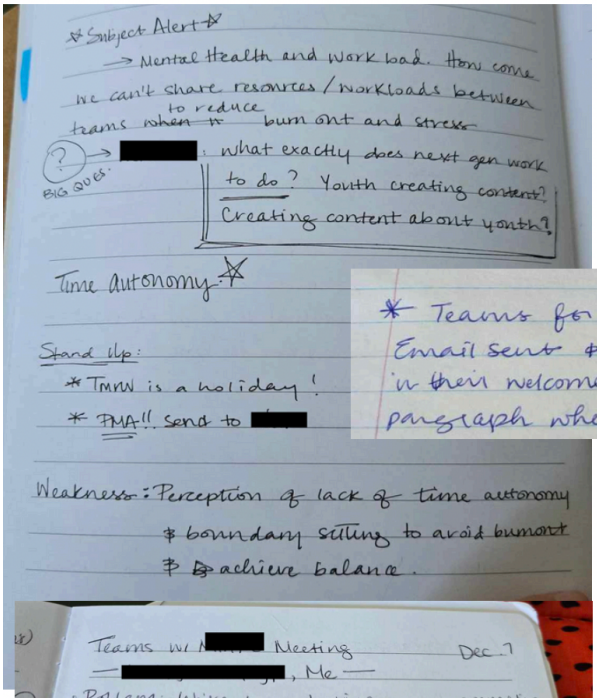


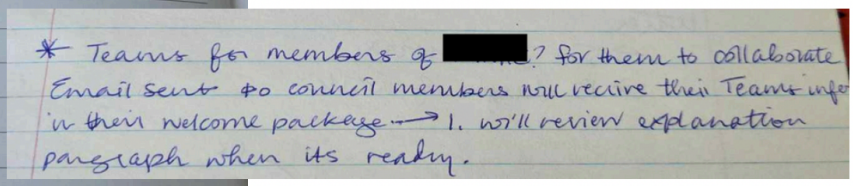


- **figuring out formatting**
- **cleaning up documents**

fieldwork journal

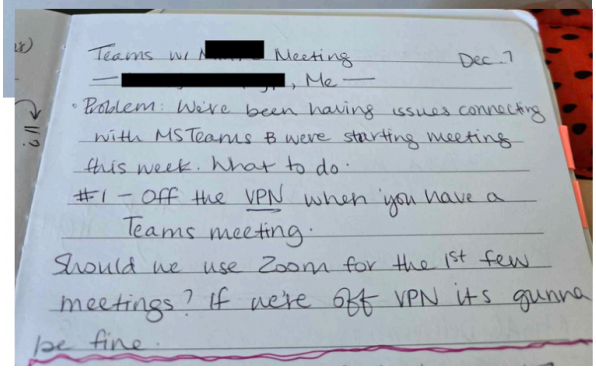
NOTES RE: VIRTUAL WORKSPACE

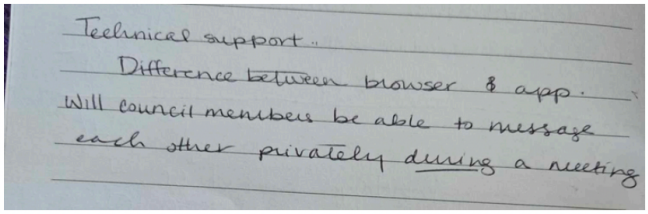




- **heightened anxiety around virutal workspace lowering the quality of team activities**

- **lack of clarity on expectations for my work regarding supervision/boundaries**





Annex 4: Conceptual Framework

Young people working desk jobs is not a novel occurrence. With the establishment of modern office spaces, it follows that there is an establishment of ‘office work’ as a professional role, and individuals of various ages working in this role. In their summary of the history of modern offices, Hansen, Kelsey, and Saini (2023) note that the emergence of an office space originates in the 1960s, when workplaces began to move beyond the factory environment. A cubicle layout was introduced that offered workers a bit of privacy and agency. This modern, cubicle office is one that most of us are now familiar with as the normative office environment (Hansen, Kelsey, and Saini, 2023).

I was inspired to propose this research while processing my lived experience as a young bureaucrat working through the COVID-19 pandemic. I wanted to document my perspective of young adults working desk jobs while coping with the transition to a completely remote and digital workspace. During my reflection, I noted that for generations people have been working in offices. In what I’ve heard from my parents, grandparents, old bosses, family friends, etc. it was not uncommon for someone to graduate from high school and begin working a desk job.

As such, what I would like to focus on in this annex is understanding when in time did these individuals began to be perceived not only as new hires (or fresh grads, or labour-market entrees), but as *youth* working in modern office spaces.

Trading ‘youth’ for ‘emerging adults’

While ageing, an individual will pass through various phases of development: from ‘infant’ to baby, ‘toddler’ to ‘child’, ‘child’ to ‘teen’, so on and so forth. These phases of

development are largely noticeable to others, marked by growth in areas such as physical appearance and communication, for example. At a certain time, they will come to a period in life in which their stage of development passes from adolescence to adulthood. This has been studied across scientific disciplines, documenting the physiological, social, and psychological nature of coming of age.

Decades ago, it was common that people would follow similar paths to adulthood: one would graduate from school or leave education (often ending at the secondary school level), get married, and get a job to support their family. However, there were many demographic changes that occurred through the mid-late 20th century that impacted the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

In Canada, the 1960s marked a significant increase to the volume of people seeking post-secondary education, prompting an unprecedented reorganization and expansion to the national system. Specifically, there was a trending uptake in North America of individuals seeking post-secondary education attainment[5]. In Canada, total post-secondary enrolment increased over 600% between 1951 and 1975 (Wisenthal, 2014). People were not as quick to leave education behind, for a variety of reasons. For some, it was about obtaining new career goals. However, more broadly, post-secondary education became increasingly accessible to more diverse groups of people, in line with progressive movements and evolving eligibility inclusivity.

[5] Though it's an American example, Arnett (2000) marked that between 1940 and the mid-90s, the number of Americans obtaining post-secondary education credentials grew over 46%.

In conjunction with the trend of increased post-secondary education attendance, social scientists noted that individuals were beginning to postpone other milestones of 'adulthood' (Arnett, 2000). People were getting married and gaining financial independence at later ages than that of the decades that preceded.

Following the pandemic, Statistics Canada (2022) released an analysis done on marriage and cohabitation and found that Canada's crude marriage rate (the number of marriages per 1,000 population) peaked in 1972 and has continued to drop in the 5 decades following. Further, the average age at marriage continues to rise. In 1968, it was approximately 25-26 years old, and in 2019, approximately 35 years old Some explanations for these trends include the increasing popularity of a common-law union, as well as the impact of COVID-19 (Statistics Canada, 2022).

> The share of all co-residing couples that were living common law, as opposed to being married, has increased steadily over time, from 6% in 1981 to 23% in 2021. Additionally, a growing share of adults live apart from their romantic partners—**particularly young adults**. While marriages still account for the majority of couples today, they represent only a part—and a shrinking part—of all romantic relationships that are formed in a given year. (Statistics Canada 2022, emphasis mine).

These trends exemplify a phenomenon that social scientists and psychologists have been documenting since the mid-20th century. The transition between adolescence and adulthood has become stretched over a longer period of time and may be considered a separate stage of life altogether. Research into the change to this development phase is conceptualized as '*emerging adulthood*', a term first coined by psychologist Jefferey Jensen Arnett (2000) (Schwartz et al, 2005).

In his work proposing *emerging adulthood,* Jeffrey Arnett (2000) provides a theoretical overview that frames his concept: mid-20th century scholars and psychologists, such as Erik Erikson, Daniel Levinson and Kenneth Keniston noticed that industrialized societies were experiencing prolonged phases of adolescence. Daniel Levinson named this stage of life (aged 17-33) the *novice phase of development,* building off Erikson's idea that late adolescence encouraged role experimentation. Conversely, Keniston pondered on this phase of life at a time where youth-led protest movements about the Vietnam war were popular. He took issue with the term 'youth', claiming that it was often applied to children and adolescence, however in the context of the ongoing protests reframed youth as 'tension between self and society' and 'refusal of socialization') (Arnett 2000: 470; citing Levinson, 1978 and Keniston, 1971).

When I was initially proposing my research idea, I was consistently asked questions like "*What is the age group that you want to study?*" and "*When you say 'youth', what do you mean by that?"* I struggled when trying to answer, as my initial inspiration was to understand how 'youth' as an identifying group was often made up of both tangible and intangible characteristics (appearance, communication style, digital proficiency, speech patterns and diction, for example). Like Keniston's notion that youth may be the rejection of socialization as opposed to a description of years alive, my original intent was to draw attention to the flexibility of how one may be perceived as a youth, based on identifying characteristics that others identify as 'youthful traits'. I was inspired by the notion of the generational subject, specifically related to Millennial and Generation Z: I observed that there were markable characteristics of Millennial and Gen Z personalities.

Though I did end up developing a stricter criterion for ‘youth’ prior to interviewing (for a more standard group of ‘youth’ workers), this initial perspective brought me to lots of literature on emerging adulthood. In many disciplines, including anthropology and sociology, a child’s transformation into an adult has been researched through temporal, culturally specific milestones. Some of the earliest anthropological work I was introduced to was focused on the anthropology of adolescence (did every anthropologist reading this immediately think “Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa”*?).

Anthropology has a history of being interested in understanding different life stages, and the cultural processes that shape them. Throughout the 20th century, many cultural anthropologists found that social systems and identities were socio-cultural constructions and advocated for cultural relativism to be used in research.

For example, Franz Boas’ research up North with Inuit during the late 19th and early 20th centuries discusses kinship systems and community dynamics (Boas, 1888). He advocated for particularism and emphasized the importance of studying a society within its unique cultural and historical context. Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* (1934) examines the relationship between kinship and identity among the Pueblo and Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka'wakw) peoples. Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) introduces cultural constructions of age and discusses how cultural norms impact the experiences of individuals in adolescence, and places value in acknowledging the importance of cultural context in anthropology. David Schneider studied age and social roles, identity formation and life-stage transitions within cultural-specific contexts.

There are many ways to approach they study and analysis of an individual transitioning into adulthood. In December 2011, Statistics Canada published an analytical

report that analyzed the Canadian young adult population's transition to adulthood using a series of transitions:

> The five markers of adult transition are:
> **Left school** – has not attended school, college or university either full-time or part-time during the nine-month period between September and May.
> **Left parental home** – is not a child in an economic family or a never-married child in a census family.
> **Full-time full-year work** – has worked full-time for at least 49 weeks during the last year.
> **Ever in a conjugal union** – is married, widowed, separated or divorced (i.e., ever married) or is currently in a common- law relationship. In the text, this concept is referred to as "ever in a conjugal union".
> **Has children** – has never-married children living in the same household.

Contrary to the methodology used by Statistics Canada, Arnett (2000) poses that emerging adulthood is a distinct phase of development, separate both from adolescence and adulthood that is prevalent for 'young adults' in post-industrialized societies. In alignment with the analytical work done by Statistics Canada, Arnett also focused his studies on individuals around the 18 – 25-year-old age range.

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, as individuals began to postpone marriage and parenthood, and there was an increase in pursual of advanced education, Arnett found that it was no longer "normative for late teens and early twenties to be a time of entering and settling into long-term adult roles" (Arnett 2000, 469). The operational use of the work 'normative' is of interest, suggesting that though it is no longer the norm for young, emerging adults to be settling into adult roles, there is not necessarily a 1:1 replacement of the norm. In lieu of a norm for the emerging adult, the phase of

development suggests experimentation, and the continuation of skills development. Arnett posits that due to a lack of 'role requirements', "[e]merging adults tend to have a wider scope of possible activities than persons in other age periods" (471). When looking at parenthood, educational, employment, and residential demographics, emerging adults are widely diversified. "Emerging adulthood is the only period of life in which nothing is normative demographically" (Arnett 2000: 471, citing Rindfuss, 1991 and Wallace, 1995).

Though pillars of the transition to adulthood are often documented as leaving education, moving out of the parental household, marriage (or cohabitation), and childrearing, as seen in Statistics Canada's excerpt above, Arnett's studies attempted to understand how emerging youth understand themselves and their positioning in life in relation to their own stage of development. Arnett documents that: "Consistently, in a variety of studies with young people in their teens and twenties, demographic transitions such as finishing education, settling into a career, marriage, and parenthood rank at the *bottom* in importance among possible criteria considered necessary for the attainment of adulthood" (472).

Instead, Arnett found that emerging youth used different distinctions/markers in relation to identify their transition to adulthood. These distinguishing traits are less tangible; markers such as "*accepting responsibility for one's self*", *"making independent decisions"* and *"becoming financially independent"* were among the top criteria listed by these emerging adults. Similar to Erikson and other thinkers of the mid- to late-20th century, he concurred that this phase of development, though distinct, is one that is characterized by a phase of life in which role and identity exploration occurs in relation to love, work, and worldviews (473).

Specifically, in emerging adulthood, the experiences gained through work inspire questions that help an individual prepare for a life as a working adult and create a foundation of experience that will inform the type of work they do throughout their adult life. Arnett links these experiential reflections to identity development, noting that through "exploring various work possibilities, they explore identity issues as well: What kind of work am I good at? What kind of work would I find satisfying for the long term? What are my chances of getting a job in the field that seems to suit me best?" (474).

These types of questions relating to identity and work are not unlike some of the reflections I have heard while talking to others over the course of this research. The markers of emerging adulthood are often relevant to the subjects and themes I have found myself reflecting upon when thinking about my growth journey and planning for the future. Further, many of the experiences that have been shared with me during the course of this research have brought into question whether or not initial evaluations of 'being good at work' should be re-evaluated based on the changes that occurred for them during the pandemic. This is to say that, in retrospect, many of Arnett's findings are corroborated by the small sample that I heard from over the course of the last couple of years, while trying to understand how youth have navigated the pandemic.

Subject Making

Much of the language used to describe the phase between adolescence and adulthood, whether termed as 'emerging adulthood' or not, can be better understood through analysis of Michel Foucault's concept of the subject.

Michel Foucault's *subject* is not a definition of the person, but instead a concept describing the possibility of being a *certain kind* of person. This is to say that Foucault's

subject does not aim to define who a person is objectively, but instead is a concept that describes how a person (or a personality) is formed. For Foucault, the subject emerges through subjectivity and subjectification, at a point in time, and is continuously made and remade as an individual continues to experience life.

This is to say that the subject does not emerge independently; the subject always emerges at a point and place in time in which there is an existing cultural hegemony (Cremonisi, 2016). Foucault distinguishes subjectivity as the experiences, actions, and feelings of a subject.

Conversely, subjectification is the process that follows the external experiencing and interacting with subject forms (i.e., identity categories) through discourse. There is a relationship between how a subject experiences themselves and how the subject understands how external forces experiences them. This is to say that subjectivity is something the subject does, and subjectification is the act that (re)produces subjects and subjectivities. It is “the process of subjects making themselves accountable to discourses which recognize them and make them visible” (Walls, 2009: abstract and 9).

Subjectification, in broad strokes, can be understood as a process of interacting with hegemonic norms and values, and internalizing the subject’s positionality within them: “The subject must be, to what condition he is subject, what status he must have, what position he must occupy in reality or in the imaginary, in order to become a legitimate subject of this or that type of knowledge” (Foucault 2001: 942).

Foucauldian analysis on discourse also discusses that through discourse, the subject interacts with power relationships that are expressed through language and

practices (i.e., the subject interacts with the external). Foucault's understands the subject-form is shaped by power structures, and that discursive practices discipline bodies and behaviours. For Foucault, this means that subjects are historically produced through specific discourses and desires (Foucault 2001) and can be traced through a genealogy of cultural hegemony.

In relation to tracing the subject-form of emerging adults, Keniston (1971)'s understanding of youth was as a 'tension between the self and society' (Arnett 2000). From this perspective, 'youth' can be understood as a socially constructed subject-form. This can be further described by noting that a *particular* resistance between the subject-form and the dominant cultural norms, values and beliefs demonstrated through discourse results in a youthful subjectivity.

In the context of my research, I posit that the subject-form of the emerging adult are experiencing a distinct phase of development, which informs their subjectivity, and that the subject-form is consistently (re)made through discursive practice, such as navigating the workplace. Through experiencing, observing, and discussing amongst other emerging adults in the workplace, one can better understand how an event in time (such as COVID-19) that impacts the cultural hegemony within the workplace may impact the subjectivity of these emerging adults.

As subjectification is a social process where a subject performs their subjectivity (their actions, their behaviours, their thoughts through 'discourse', and receives feedback that helps to regulate and discipline their body and behaviours (hence the constant making and remaking of a subject). Interaction through discourse, then, is a method of

learning/validating knowledge; if the performance of the subject-form is validated, then the subject-form feels secure.

Further, for the emerging adults centred in this research, one should note that the cultural hegemony that they have experienced while growing up would impact their subjectivity as well. This is to say that there can be expected generational differences between emerging adults at different points in time.

Although observation of generational differences in the workplace exists academically, the application of generational subject-making in the workplace for contemporary anthropology is lacking. Interdisciplinarily, the concept of the generational subject attempts to observe the nuances of subjects in the workplace.

Diane Skinner (2013) argues that the subjectification and subjectivity of a person can be partially explored through observation of how work environments contribute to subjectification. Skinner writes that “employees surrender their selves to the demands of their work organizations” (Skinner, 2013: 906). The subjectivity of the employee is manipulated by an employer, “invoking a desire to change one’s self and to become something that one was not before” (906). In this fashion, the expectations and direction of an employing organization alters the subject by “…managing what they think and feel, and not just how they behave’ (Willmott, 1993: 516)” (Skinner, 2013: 907, citing Willmott,1993: 516). The office and the organization that governs it therefore impacts a subject through subjectification, but also by created expectations that in turn impact an employee’s subjectivity. Skinner argues that “subjectivity, then, is not something that is done to individuals; they participate in the constitution of their own subjectivity as they reflect on, and reproduce the social world” (Skinner 2019, 424). The reproduction of the

working environment through the subject is an important factor to consider when thinking about the multigenerational office-space.

The exploration of subject-making with specific interest in the multigenerational office space involves the analysis of the ethics of different working age groups through conflict and resolution, general comportment (Kapoor and Solomon) and interpretation of organizational structure (VanMeter et. al). This concept compliments that of Prensky's digital native, through the conceptualization of the generally identified, notable differences between the comportment of older generations at work in comparison to younger generations at work. These differences are significant only in that people notice them.

For example, in 2011, Camille Kapoor and Nicole Solomon took up an investigation, diving into how different generations coexist in dynamic ways within the workforce. In their article "Understanding and Managing Generational Differences in the Workplace", Kapoor and Solomon intend to solve or mitigate the potential conflicts that arise in multi-generational workplaces, arguing that these conflicts are based in how the subjectivities of various generations contribute to overall personality of individuals, and is reflected in their values and priorities (Kapoor and Solomon 2011, 314). Kapoor and Solomon mobilize a strong literature review to better analyze the distinctive differences between how individuals of different generations act in a corporate workplace.

Kapoor and Solomon's work provides an anthropological basis to approach the differences between the ways in which workers of different ages relate to and experience their workplace. This is complimented by VanMeter et. al's article, by their conclusion that millennials may not interpret organizational structures in the same ways as previous generations of work. In my research, I will use this concept to further analyze how these

differences play out in corporate workspaces, and how the category of youth becomes renegotiated by being tied to the outcomes of these differences.

How we learn: situated learning

In 1991, social learning theorist Etienne Wenger and social anthropologist Jean Lavé published their book *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* Lavé and Wenger understand learning as an "integral constituent" of social engagement, which refers to the process they call legitimate peripheral participation (LLP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). They note that learning is a constant, ongoing process, and is deeply tied to the creation of identities (Hutchins 1993: 743). Similar to Foucauldian discourse theory, they conceptualize learning as "participation in the social world (43). Lavé and Wegner's conceptualization of learning as a social process via participation in the world compliments Foucauldian notions that the subject is produced through discursive practice, which is also social. Further, Foucault "described social systems operating within discursive domains as *ensembles of practice*" (Walls, 2009: 11, citing Foucault 1980). For Lavé and Wegner, LLP is the method of skill, experience, and approval acquisition from a *community of practice*.

Communities of practice are "complete communities that are dependent on novices just as they are dependent on experienced members" (Brooks et al. 2020: 1046). Within a community of practice, knowledge is situated and context-dependent (1047). The contextual specifics are important when considering that knowledge is gained within "the conditions of learning, rather than just the abstract subject matter" (1048). Within a community of practice, there are novices and experienced members, and learning can be understood as somewhat cyclical: novices learn from experienced members, becoming

experienced themselves, and ready to teach new novices. Lavé and Wenger note that as novices move towards increased participation, they will generate identity and motivation (Lavé and Wenger 1991, 24).

Lavé and Wenger note that novices alter the dynamics within a community of practice. Their existence requires the other members to demonstrate, model and/or teach skills, “explicitly articulating taken-for-granted assumptions, remembering important incidents to recount and developing their own praxis through dialogue” (Brooks et al. 2020: 1046-1047). Novices also help to consolidate and reaffirm the knowledge of the experienced members, as well as actively contribute to work practice themselves, as they have some existing knowledge when entering a community of practice (1046).

Brooks et. al consider the workplace in their review of situated learning. With consideration to the communit(ies) of practice that exist within a workplace, they consider that novices, through LLP, “participate in work-based activity under the guidance of a ‘master’” (1017) and slowly develops enough knowledge and practice to become core to the community of practice.

Marc Prensky’s (2001) concepts of the *digital native and immigrant* are of particular interest while discussing the emerging adults of 2021-24’s shift in leadership. In their text “Millennials and the World of Work: An Organization and Management Perspective” Hershatter and Epstein (2010) reintroduce us to Marc Prensky’s concept of the “digital native”. They maintain that the digital technologies used in the workplace are indigenous for Millennials and Gen Z’ers (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010: 212). The authors use the conceptualization of the digital native to think through the generational difference in the workplace. It also, in turn, implies that older generations at work can be thought of as

“digital immigrants” (213). This led me to inquire about the conceptual origins of “digital natives”.

In 2001, in his book *On the Horizon,* Marc Prensky wrote a chapter called “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants”. He poses that there is a ‘new’ problem afoot: “digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language” (Prensky, 2001: 2).

In his chapter “On Failing to Learn to Shoot a Gun” in *Search after Method, Sensing, Moving, and Imagining in Anthropological Fieldwork* (2020)*,* Bradley Dunseith brings forward a particular observation about skill: “In much of the anthropological writing and thinking about skill,” he writes, “the skilled are idealized practitioners who have perfected their craft. While there is nothing inherently wrong in thinking about skills as they should be performed, it may not accurately convey how skills are actually practiced” (Dunseith, 2020: 196).

For the digital native and digital immigrant, technological operation and digital skillsets are key, however there is a certain flexibility in how the practice of skill impresses upon someone’s digital “status”. I, for example, am not the most technologically proficient individual. However, the “natural” inclination I have to use digital resources and tools to problem-solve or fill my time may reflect how my daily digital skills are practiced.

Similarly, Prensky discusses how digital natives have developed skills and tendencies for high speed and multi-modal learning that is often misunderstood by digital immigrants (Prensky 2001, 3). The ways in which this can contribute to subjectivities is

interesting—a positioning specific to digital natives that limits them in the workplace, as their superiors may be limited (or inflexible) in the ways in which they can guide and teach a digital native (3-4). As such, and technology progresses into the contemporary sphere (with the rise of social medias, audio-visual messaging platforms, and app development), digital natives become more inclined to teach each other, and at times the digital immigrants, the things they have learned.

Perhaps it is more pertinent to say instead that the community of practice that surrounded using digital technologies for business operations became more prominent than prior to the pandemic. In this community of practice, emerging adults, largely as digital natives, are better positioned to be leaders to others, and have the experience and practice of not only using software and devices, but also experience teaching each other what they have learned.

When the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a mandated remote work environment, the dynamics of communities of practice shifted in office environments. Suddenly, ‘novices’ of existing communities of practice were using skills and experience earned in other communities of practice, related to digital technologies, and were helping established community members learn how to navigate the new environment.

Annex 5: Methodological Approach

Short Introduction

When I was twenty-one, freshly graduated from my undergraduate degree, I told my father I wanted to move out of the house. “Where would you go?”, he asked me. I didn’t know how to answer; I wanted to live many places, both close to home and international, and we ended up discussing where in the world we *wouldn’t* live. Upon my hesitation, he told me: “the best advice I got from my uncle is that there is no better place to live than in a country’s capital. They should have everything there.”

I have been living in the National Capital Region (NCR) my whole life. My father was born in India, lived in England, and, as his parents sought different opportunities, immigrated to Canada as a teenager. Once established in Canada, my grandfather got a job as a federal public servant, and following in his footsteps, my father spent his career as a Government of Canada employee.

My mother grew up in Ottawa, and her father spent his career as a land surveyor. He ran his own business, and my grandmother stayed at home as a caretaker. My mother often said that running a business was good only as long as the business was there; if it was steady then it could be great. If it was ‘fine’, you would suffer. She cautioned us that it was a difficult way for her to grow up, and she supported my father in pushing us towards the public service for work.

Growing up, my siblings and I were taught that a government job should be our goal. To them, it would lead to a position, and hopefully a career, that would offer the best pay to security ratio. They never said it, but I often wondered if this was a motivator for my parents to stay in Ottawa; they wanted us to be geographically close to opportunities

that could offer their children stability. In Ottawa, the office work is plentiful. It was not a large surprise when I began working for the federal government upon graduating in 2019.

Prior to working virtually, my daily route to work started in the east end of Ottawa and ended right in the centre of the downtown core. However, the global pandemic required many offices to take on virtual workspaces to carry out their operations. From March 16, 2020, to September of 2022, I worked entirely remotely, and my daily route to work became the few steps between my bedroom and my desk.

My first and primary method in understanding how the subject form 'youth' is embodied and (re)made within remote and hybrid workspaces is a form of participant observation that goes beyond Malinowski's initial ideas of "off the verandah" immersion. I have drawn from my personal experience and my observable interactions within the office spaces that I worked in throughout the pandemic (March 2020-September 2022) as well as my experiences in transitioning to a hybrid work environment (September 2022-Spring 2024). In conjunction with observing and experiencing the remote workplace, I used journal entries as a method to concretely document my observations and experiences.

Journaling and Note Taking

Though my research for this thesis formally began in 2021, providing the context (via Annex 2) that comes from the transition into a remote work environment (2020-2021) is critical to understand how things were when I began this academic journey.

I have always been inclined to write things down. True to myself, when I began to work from home in 2020, I kept journal entries to document my experience navigating my

new environment, as well as keep myself occupied through the most isolating period of the pandemic. I wrote entries and notes to myself to stay engaged with my workspace as the work pace slowed considerably in the early months of the pandemic. I also used my journal entries to try and keep a level head during frustrating encounters that I had with colleagues.

The period of transition to remote work was a lonely time for me. I did not know many people my age who were working for the government or dealing with transitions like mine. There were not many outlets available to me to externalize my feelings without having to first provide months of context or to explain key players in my stories. It was easier for me to write down how I was feeling, and as such the journaling methodological approach was easily continued as I moved forward with my observation for this research.

Many early journal entries documented my minimal workload, as well as things said in meetings, emails, and in passing to me that frustrated me. I have records of tasks and activities that were delegated to me only as it was presumed that I had an appropriate skill set to act on them due to my age rather than due to my job description.

Additionally, journaling was an accessible method for my documentation throughout this research as the popularity of written communication (e.g., emails, texts, letters) skyrocketed in my social surroundings during the pandemic. It took time for some people in my social circle to transition to using audio-visual communication methods, as many were not as comfortable downloading unfamiliar software or adapting to new (to them) forms of communication and preferred to stick with what they knew.

Figure 4. Ten (10) of my notebooks and journals that I filled during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the remote workspace became a more predictable environment (i.e., standardized software for communication, access to emails and shared folders, and a department-wide directive on work operations were established), journal entries began to morph into note taking. I was also able to document some of the messages I had been receiving online.

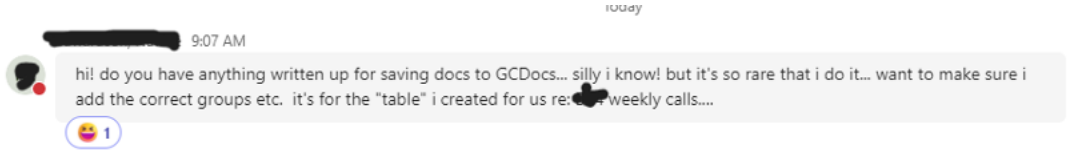


Figure 5. A Teams message asking if I had created anything to help my manager save a document online.

As my field site changed from an entirely virtual work environment to a hybrid work environment, there was a shift in my experiences and observations. I was a little bit freer to talk to colleagues and be introduced to ones I had not yet met.

Many departmental 'town halls' (i.e., all-staff meetings), group discussions, and private conversations included commentary on employees' feelings with regards to heading back into a physical office. For me, I felt stressed about the possibility of encountering someone sick, but it was very nice to meet the team I had been working with in person. I noticed a shift in dynamics; the more willing I was to go into the office (and to coordinate the same days with my colleagues), the more I felt respected and included in decision making. I observed that when my colleagues had a chance to know me in person[6], it seemed like their answers to the questions I had improved, and they were able to better understand my communication and learning styles.

Active Listening and Storytelling

In addition to observation and experience, I employed storytelling in my journey to better understand the relationship between emerging adults and the virtual/hybrid work environment experienced during (and post-) the COVID-19 pandemic. Using active listening, I documented stories and experiences of others shared with me through semi-structured interviews.

As I navigated my field sites, I heard from a variety of people; "in" the office, my peers, other colleagues, and my friends (who upon hearing the topic of my thesis, came

[6] Note that in March 2022, I changed jobs and started on a new team at a different department. This transition and position were 100% virtual until about September/October 2022.

to me expressing that they'd like to share an anecdote or two for my consideration). Some colleagues would apologize, assuming when they heard I was writing my thesis that I had all the information I needed. However, I encouraged them to share with me anything they liked or thought relevant if they felt comfortable volunteering the information. I have reveled in their willingness to share their memories with me, including hearing from colleagues in management positions, who are older and who supervise and/or employ emerging adults.

Hearing from colleagues in person in the office was considerably more emotive than any conversations I had through Teams. People were more inclined to use explicit language, hand gestures, and share personal details with me while talking to me in the office. This made it easier for me to gauge their levels of frustration and sincerity, which was more conducive to my analysis.

While analyzing and documenting these conversations, I aimed to be careful in my listening and engaging with others and to do my best to capture not only the words but their feelings and expression through their stories. I noted how their demeanor changed throughout the conversation, and whether they would return to tell me more.

In his chapter "Live to Tell: In and Out of View in the Interview", Ari Gandsman writes on the dangers of formal interviews, cautioning against the implied "formalized procedure and systematic technique with a standardized approach in a highly ritualized and contrived encounter" (Gandsman et al. 2020, 167). Gandsman says that in anthropology, formal interviews take form in slightly different ways than in other disciplines, and that anthropology tends to "emphasize a more dialogic encounter that

takes connotations of a police interrogation or job interview. Our open-endedness follows the lines drawn by respondents rather than our own boilerplate texts" (174).

I employed storytelling in my semi-structured interviews, hoping that the narratives shared, both in content and delivery, would provide me with insight and help me answer questions in research without "ply[ing] them with questions…that meet the preordained needs of the inquiry" (167). Though I did not strive to "erase my presence" (Gandsman et al. 2020, 168) from these discussions, I did try to remain aware of how my presence, and our shared environments impacted our conversations.

Semi-Structured Interviews

For this research, the criteria for selecting participants included employees that were youth (less than 30 years old), and within their first five years of their careers. I talked to six emerging adults that worked in an office environment (including fully and partially (i.e., hybrid) remote) that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic: Hera, Sullivan, Rahul, Nicole, Bobbi, and Kristin. Of these six individuals, three began working in office environments prior to the directive for remote work (Hera, Sullivan, and Rahul) and three began working in office environments after the directive for remote work was implemented (Nicole, Bobbi, and Kristen).

Prior to the interview, all participants were advised on what type of information I was seeking. I had developed sample questions and circulated them to the participants. I also shared my research question with them, and a short synopsis of why I felt inspired to begin this work.

All interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes, but as the conversations began to flow and the participants felt more comfortable sharing in-depth details of their stories, many of the discussions went over-time, and wrapped up around the 90-minute mark. Several participants also followed up with me afterwards with more thoughts or additional experiences, as they occurred, wanting me to note that their experiences are occurring in real-time alongside the research I was conducting.

All participants provided me with consent to audio record our conversations, to allow me to reference the discussions afterwards while analyzing the contents of the interviews. However, all six participants asked that I do not share clips of them speaking and requested the use of pseudonyms. While interviewing, I realized that I had assumed that there would be resistance from the participants to discuss potentially sensitive workplace topics with me. However, all six participants were interviewed independently, and, coupled with the assurance that I would not share their information nor use any of the audio collected, all six participants surprised me in their willingness to disclose personal information to me.

During the interviews, I took notes on themes that were recurring (ex. feeling underworked), language being used (ex. positive/negative language, terms like ‘trapped’ or ‘limited’, the roles relevant to the stories they were sharing (ex. director, manager, partner), and information about the individual situations they were recounting.

Analysis of the interviews included reviewing the audio recorded during the discussion and cross-referencing the findings of each discussion to better understand any overarching themes, commonalities, and differences. For example: the largest overarching observation that I noted was that when I asked participants about how they

felt as a young person working in an office environment many of them spoke with self-confidence and spoke from a position of strength. Conversely, when I asked participants how they felt other colleagues perceived them with consideration to their age, most of the participants responded with negative sentiments.

Further, many of the participants, such as Nicole, Rahul, and Sullivan, spoke feeling free to ‘be themselves’. When I asked about what they meant by this, all three participants shared similar observations that their older colleagues did not act ‘like themselves’ with the majority of their other colleagues but tended to act a bit more personally with their younger teammates. Nicole, Rahul, and Sullivan all shared sentiments that being youthful was the distinction that allowed them to be themselves in the workplace, and that they felt like older generations were performing differently with their colleagues. Some speculation identified that this difference in behaviour was potentially driven by older colleagues engaging in a performance of professionalism, erasing much of their personality from ‘professional’ interactions. This implies that the more personal approach that was felt by the emerging adults may be related to other employees feeling like can lack of the same air professionalism when conversing with the younger employees.

Participant Profiles

SULLIVAN KLEIN

PROGRAM OFFICER

Federal Government

PROFILE

- 25 years old at time of interview (January 2024)
- Has been working for the federal government since 2017

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

Sullivan leads the implementation of youth-focused programming, working with both regional offices and applicants of the program. Sullivan also recently began supervising two other employees on a part-time basis, with tasking only relevant to the program (i.e., not supervising leave or attendance of the other employees).

Sullivan shared that there were more discrepancies between the work they were hired to complete and their tasks after advancing from a student position to a non-supervisory, full-time employee.

Sullivan shared that they joined this team in December 2022, while still fully virtual, and that having the opportunity to switch teams allowed them to change the perception of themselves, going from 'new hire/junior employee' to a more self-assured subject-matter expert, and have noticed that they are treated with more authority and respect in this new role.

"I think it's normal that students get told to do the grunt work, but it's really hard to be seen as "not-a-student" by the same team that you were previously a student for, and that makes it hard to be taken a bit more seriously".

The team that they currently work with is very relaxed, and all members were added to this team after Sullivan (including the manager). Sullivan shared that as they were the first to be hired onto this team, they were able to lead the team in maintaining a laid-back and friendly attitude, where they feel welcome and supported to share their honest opinions. However, Sullivan also noted that "it can be really challenging to be yourself at work, instead of trying to act like [an] overly professional version of yourself. Sometimes you feel like being yourself will result in people not being able to take you seriously, because they assume that intense professionalism is the act someone puts on show they deserve this job, and to earn basic respect".

Sullivan also shared that it was difficult to develop a mentorship with anyone you didn't already know while in a virtual context: "Unless someone is willing to put you in contact with a new potential mentor, you're sort of stuck to the colleagues you already know. For me, this meant that I either needed to change roles, or manage my expectations about what type of mentorship I wanted to have."

Sullivan is in the process of applying to a new position in a different department of the federal government and has shared that they were unsure if they had the skill set appropriate to make it through the skills assessments. Though they passed and have moved onto the next round of evaluations, Sullivan's insecurities were partially caused by the feeling of stagnation through their time spent working remotely.

BOBBI DUCETTE

EVENT COORDINATOR

Federal Government

PROFILE

- 25 years old at time of interview (January 2024)
- Has been working for the federal government since June 2023

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

Bobbi is new to her position in the federal government. Prior to joining her current role, she worked in a variety of fields: childcare, retail, medical administration, and vision therapist. Her current position as an administrative assistant in event coordination is Bobbi's first job in an office environment.

Bobbi's role includes developing web-pages for events, creating links to virtual attendance platforms, writing statistical reports for an event's attendance, the coordination of simultaneous interpretation and translation services, as well as providing coverage for her colleagues when they are absent (they are often absent).

Bobbi does not find a discrepancy between what she was hired to do and what she does, however at times finds she is doing the work of multiple people, including those at levels above her own. She shared that she believes that because she is thorough and proficient in using the softwares required to complete her tasks, other colleagues often ask her for support, instead of learning the system better to improve their performance. Bobbi is often asked to train new hires on top of managing her workload, and taking on the additional tasks of absent colleagues. Many of Bobbi's colleagues are over the age of 40, and have expressed to her that they struggle with the various digital systems required to accomplish their tasks.

Bobbi enjoys the company of some of her colleagues, however often finds herself frustrated with her colleagues' inconsistent performance, and tells me about the consistent turnover in staff due to the volume and intensity of work. Her relationship with senior management is okay, however she feels a lack of trust in them: "They constantly tell me I'm doing an amazing job, that they recognize how much of the slack I'm picking up, but they keep giving other people promotional opportunities before me, and continue to keep me on a finite contract, rather than signing me on indeterminately. Bobbi has noted that she thinks that there is favouritism in her place of work and that others are being promoted due to their connections rather than their performance.

"It's so irritating. I've had to learn how to do so many things for this job: how to code, how to use their special systems, how to onboard people and train them. No one really was able to do that for me, and even though they tell me they appreciate it, they keep passing me over for other opportunities. I wonder sometimes if I'm too good in my role, and they don't want me to move up because then there would be no one else doing well at my level. I've had to teach 3 or 4 new people how to do this job, and some of those people are moving into positions above mine, that no one told me about."

Though Bobbi shared that she wants to change roles, she feels that she is unable to move since she has no capacity to be mentored on the skills she needs for the more advanced roles, and does not get an opportunity to work on corporate committees or other initiatives that would put her in contact with people from other teams.

NICOLE LAFAYETTE

INTERMEDIATE CLOUD ACCOUNTING ASSOCIATE

Private Sector

PROFILE

- 26 years old at time of interview (February 2024)
- Has been working for a private corporate organization since Summer 2022

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

Nicole has been working as a bookkeeper for an international organization since graduating from her post-secondary program in 2022. She does a variety of accounting-related tasks, including generating T4s, payroll, and file management.

Nicole works from a physical shared office more than other participants. She often goes to her work's head office, as well as the office of clients she services through the company.

Nicole shared that she has been consistently doing work above her level since being hired on as a full-time employee, which is corroborated by her relatively quick advancement in the organization. She shared that she has been often feeling stressed at work, sometimes requiring her to take leave, due to mismanagement from her supervisor. Nicole shared that as she worked to resolve the issues that come from this mismanagement, she was cautioned by her mother to act professionally and not to "rock the boat". Nicole found this advice to be a reflection of her mother's age: "I'm sorry but what my supervisor is doing is not okay, and I don't feel bad about trying to resolve it with our manager. My mom worries that it will jepordize my credibility at work, but honestly I've only received positive affirmation that what is happening is in fact inappropriate, and that by coming forward I am not only helping manage my own situation but also inadvertently helping others being supervised by her. Young people can speak up for themselves and be heard, without being perceived as whiny, or immature and sensitive. I think that says a lot about how my mother treats younger people at her work, or at the very least what she has noticed in some of her colleagues."

As the supervisor is in the role between Nicole and her manager, Nicole suffered the mismanagement for months without feeling as though she could go directly above her to the manager. "What if my mom was right? For so long I felt like it wasn't wise to take the risk to go around my supervisor. I thought I had to pay my dues, which was annoying because I also had to fix her mistakes, which she would often blame on me. It got to a point where I finally talked to the manager, and she had to tell my supervisor not to touch certain files. I often feel shocked at how could she have gotten to the supervisor level without knowing how to work the system. Maybe she's being doing it wrong for years?"

When Nicole and I talked about how she feels as a youth in an office setting, she said: "At first, it's very exciting to feel like it gives you a competitive edge. People assumed I was better at using the computer than them, or certain programs, and they were right. But it gets old, to constantly have people remind you that they think that they are right because they have been here longer, even though they are consistently proven wrong. Or when I get passed over for opportunities because there's an assumption that I am naive and not ready to have new information given to me. Meanwhile, I feel like in school I had to balance a thousand different things and so much information, but here it's like you have only four or five things to know at a time".

RAHUL ARUN

JUNIOR STATISTICS OFFICER

Federal Government

PROFILE

- 27 years old at time of interview (February 2024)
- Has been working for the federal government since 2017

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

Rahul and I work in the same department, and I do consider him to be a friend of mine. Often, we talk about how we feel at work. For our informal interview, Rahul started the conversation with a familiar opening line: "Hey, do you think the people on my team like me?"

Rahul is frustrated in his role; since he has been at the same level for multiple years, he is convinced that his lack of advancement is caused by personal dislike from his senior colleagues. Rahul shares that often his mistakes come when he is distracted in perceiving interpersonal issues with his colleagues. "Honestly. I do my job well. I'm competent. I have an advanced degree. I've worked in other departments at levels higher than this one. I think I do my job well the majority of the time, but as soon as I make a minor mistake - I mean *really* minor, like spelling mistakes, or swapping a header - I get in so much trouble. The attitude they bring to me is that I made the mistake because I didn't know any better, rather than knowing that sometimes mistakes happen!"

While talking with Rahul, I notice that he often explains his feelings, and then spends significant time reviewing the context for that has lead him to feel this way. In great detail, he explains specific conflicts that he's been involved with, which compound into a reason for his intense feelings:

"It's just; [his supervisor] left me comments in my document that said *literally* "I think a comma should go here" and "I think you misspelt her name, it doesn't have a hyphen in it". Like, am I crazy to think, like 'well then just fix it'? She treats me like I'm some sort of like, stupid idiot, and I'm *sorry* but I've been in the government for *seven years*. Why is it that when I make small mistakes, she's all up on me about them, but no one ever mentions how I fix major mistakes that she makes, where she's, like, misunderstood a concept and I move to fix it, and I never receive any acknowledgement."

At times, he will talk about his experience in grade school, where teachers and other people who were authority figures made him feel stupid. In conjunction to this, he also talks at length about content-specific tasks he is working on, in order to validate that the actions he's taken to action them are sensible to me.

I often respond to these 'action checks' with the same approach: I begin by telling him that I do not work on his files, and so in this aspect I am ignorant. I ask questions, and then instead of validating his work, I explain what I may do to approach the task. In these portions of our conversation, I see that he is looking to me as both an equivalent peer, but is simultaneously acknowledging that I've advanced multiple levels in my role since beginning, while he's stayed stagnant.

Though we started at the same level, my team has made me feel competent, has listened to my ideas, and approached them with critique that has been helpful and reasonable, and I think Rahul has been made to feel oppositely. Our different team dynamics have impacted our view of our team and our capability to perform.

HERA HOWARD

JUNIOR POLICY ANALYST

Federal Government

PROFILE

- 25 years old at time of interview (February 2024)
- Has been working for the federal government since 2018

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

Hera and I have known each others a few years, and both began working in our roles as students. In her current role, Hera works on public education products for youth, as well as on files related to stakeholder engagement. Though she is an employee with one of the lower classification levels on her team, Hera works on multiple files with colleagues that are two to three levels higher than her, and has shared that the type of work they do is the same.

Hera shared her frustrations about being a young office worker and the expectation of over-achievement: "I understand that when you first join and you're a new grad and stuff that it's not uncommon to really show them what you can do. But even though I've been working for almost 6 years, I'll say it feels like they never acknowledge the good work as a sign of competency, only as the 'bright eyed-new grad' personality, instead of actually a willingness to learn skills and move up. It's annoying - I feel like I'm becoming burned out and withdrawing a bit from my work and colleagues, and it's being interpreted as me 'becoming normal' or becoming like them, and feels like I'm proving them right."

Hera explains that while she started working in office environments prior to COVID-19, she's felt like the directive for remote work allowed her to demonstrate additional skills and competency within the virtual workplace. "It feels good to be able to show them new tricks on the computer that so many of my friends would consider rudimentary. It makes me feel like a leader and like the master that is taking pupils under her wing". She laughs and pumps her eyebrows with this. Her laugh is infectious - and I respond with one of my own, considering my own experience helping colleagues transition to virtual platforms.

Hera's position is unique among the other participants. She is the youngest person on her team, and a large responsibility of her team's output is to connect with youth. However, she shared that her team doesn't listen to her opinions on youth engagement. "It's frustrating because I feel like they rely on my ability to teach them new computer tricks, or my ability to handle multiple priorities 'just like in school', but when I want to use my youth to help them meet their working goals, they don't respect what I have to say. It's hard because I do feel like my age and position in my life generally brings a lot to the table, and I feel like being youthful in the role that I have right now should be considered an asset, but at the same time I am so irritated by the fact that it seems to be an asset in the wrong way."

Hera voices her disappointment in 'the system' for taking advantage of her and her peers: "It's not my job to show people who make twice my salary how to mute themselves on calls or how to recall an email. Instead of acknowledging the work that me and other newer or younger employees do since the work-from-home order, we're barely thanked for being helpful. It feels like the expectation is always that I'm going to share what I know and help out without asking, but no one reciprocates by teaching me how I can accomplish my career goals by using these skills and experience I've gained by doing all this 'silent' work."

KRISTEN TALCY

TITLE

Federal Government

PROFILE

- 26 years old at time of interview (February 2024)
- Has been working for the federal government since 2021

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

Kristen began working in an office while the work from home directive was still being implemented full-time. Prior to working for the federal government, Kristen worked mainly in retail sales positions.

Kristen's position includes activities including the development of infographics and organizational charts, as well as coordinating a shared inbox, leading a program file, and coordinating initiatives with regional colleagues. "Working for the government makes me mad and makes me feel stupid. I feel like people talk to me like I'm an idiot who doesn't know what's going on. And then I get confused, which furthers their belief that I don't know what I'm doing, but really I'm confused because what they are doing doesn't make any sense!" When I asked Kristen to explain what she meant by that statement, she explained that she often feels frustrated in her role because she can see large gaps or holes in planning and delivery of certain activities, but when asking questions about them is treated as if her questions indicate she doesn't understand the tasks at hand.

Kristen shares with me that starting her career as an office-worker in the middle of the remote work mandate was challenging because she was only able to interact with her immediate team, who did not share very much about the broader systems and culture that impact her role. Further, her partner also began working for the government during the remote working period, which was challenging. "Instead of being able to figure things out together, we were twice as confused because I guess every government organization operates differently. Honestly this is probably part of why I'm not sure I like my job--I didn't really have a reference point. It's gotten a bit better since we started going back a couple of days a week, but it's frustrating because there are so many rules that feel like, arbitrary or need-less, and no one can explain to me why I need to follow them or even how to follow them. It seems like they are meant to be interpreted but sometimes it feels like I don't really know where to find the tools to do that".

Kristen also told me that her current role is her second as a public servant. She left her previous role to take on a higher-paying position with her current organization. Despite this change, Kristen shared that she often feels like the administrative assistant for her team, and that some of her older colleagues routinely ignore emails and messages sent to them, and expect Kristen to send them reminders or respond on their behalf. Kristen states that she believes this is because the remote and hybrid work environment has changed expectations regarding response times and have increased the ability for people to micro-manage one another. She says "I don't want to be the 'micro-manager' that constantly reminds them that they have emails to answer--that's not my job and it's not my problem that they can't keep up with the expectations of their role. But, that being said, I think it's pretty crazy that I had to double check with my manager that I wasn't in fact the admin assistant. It really felt convincing the way they were typing to me that I was the one dropping the ball on that. I think the older employees are just really struggling to adjust to the quicker answering expectations and stuff. Even if they've been taught how to do something a few times, no one can really teach them how to internalize computer skills so it can be frustrating watching them struggle. But at a certain point, I guess it's my job to stop teaching them, because it's getting me confused".

Annex 6: An Excerpt from the Executives Networking Event

Arriving

I follow my GPS and park my car in the parking lot it has led me to. The gravel plot is a few blocks away from Dow's Lake, and it's nearly full. Earlier this week, my friend asked me to participate in a networking event that she's helped organize. Last night she sent me a ticket, free of charge. The tickets for this event were normally $49 and were almost sold out.

I hesitate as I get out of the car; I'm not sure what I'm meant to bring inside with me, to appropriately attend a networking event. *Should I bring my computer, or would that be rude? Should I bring my work phone? Do I wear my identification pass or will they give me a name tag? Even if they* would *give me a name tag, would they have* my *name, since I got my ticket so late?*

I have come to this event alone. I can't hear my footsteps over the wind in my ears. My teammates were hesitantly supportive of my participation in this event, as the workload has been quiet this week. I know that my friend will be there, however as an organizer she will not be able to stay by my side. I am feeling anxious; I do not know how to behave in this type of environment. So, I worry that I will behave poorly, and that 'being myself' will not be sufficient today. The wind is cold coming off the lake, and it's made quick work of undoing the 30 minutes of hair styling that I worked so diligently on this morning. My mind is racing.

What if I'm too casual, and people think I'm not serious? What if other people interpret my casualness as stupidity? I can't act overly professional, because then I know *I will sound stupid trying to fake big words. I can't risk using a word that I am not confident*

I know the definition of. What if people think I'm a complainer; I'd better ask positive questions to the executive. Is my outfit business casual? I wish I had better clothes. What if I'm overdressed? What if I don't like the executives' energy? Will I be able to fake my enthusiasm?

I am walking to a networking event, but it's not just *any* networking event. Today the Young Professional's Network is hosting their first 'in-person' networking event since the debut of the WFH directive. The objective is to put young professionals in contact with executives – professionals in various senior positions, who have volunteered to participate and share their knowledge with the next generation of the public service.

This is the second 'in-person' event that I've attended since March 2020, and it feels like my first networking event in general. If I have ever attended an event like this before, I can't recall it at this moment.

As I approach the pavilion, I notice other young people walking towards the entrance from different directions. Suddenly aware that they will likely be attending the same event as me, I do my best to appear confident and casual. For the most part, they keep their heads down and I am successful in avoiding eye contact until I get through the front door.

Upon entering, I'm asked for my name. Initially, they cannot find the name tag that should have been reserved for me. I feel like a fraud, as though they know that I am unprepared and did not 'earn' my way here. My name tag is handed to me a few moments later; "it was filed in the wrong place".

I continue into the main room. It's a large crescent shaped venue with about ten round tables set up and a stage in the centre of the farthest wall. There is a smaller crescent shaped bar, spooned by the room. There are large carafes of ice water along the counter, and rows of overturned cups, ready to be used. I am reminded of the prom; the setup is almost formal in its appearance although it's daytime and the people around me are dressed in business wear.

My friend is hovering near the door and crosses the steady stream of entrants as she approaches the coat rack where I am hanging my jacket up. "I'm happy you're here," she says. "It's going to be a long afternoon, I think, but it will be fun for you to meet some of the co-workers I complain about". She points out various people to me as we walk the length of the crescent towards the bathroom. When we get to the bathroom, she gets called away to do something, and I am alone again. I make a comment about the lack of hand soap to a woman at the sinks. She looks older, so I think she must be one of the executives of the day. She looks at me and says nothing.

Awesome start.

Walking back to the plenary, I find the bar and fill myself a glass of water. My name tag includes a number, and I realize that I have an assigned table to sit at. I find my designated table (it's close to the stage) and take a seat. I am alone at the table.

After a few moments, I'm joined by some other young professionals. There are a couple of students, who work part time. There is a man and a woman, they are colleagues, and the man's working dog. The man is visually impaired, and it is unclear to me if the woman is also attending the event independently or if she is here to support the man as

part of an accommodation. She does not speak very much, other than to the man, although the man begins to participate in the table's conversation.

It's light, polite discussion. The circumstances that brought each of us here are shared (minus that of the man's companion), how long we have been working in our roles, and how we are finding our jobs. We talk of the weather, and one of the students shares that she has an exam forty-five minutes after the event's end. I learn that I am the highest-level participant at my table, and that I've been in my role the longest. My friend is standing against the wall across the room, with her hands clasped behind her back.

Suddenly, a loud noise overtakes the room and everyone at my table flinches. The dog lies down by his master's feet, and his tail is tickling my ankles.

"Welcome everyone! We're going to get started in a few moments, so if you have not already done so we ask that everyone find their seats!"

The Executive

The participants settle into their spots, and five people take to the stage. They introduce themselves, and then explain how the event will work. Executives from various organizations have volunteered to participate in today's event. Each one will be seated at a table, and the people around the table will have fifteen minutes to talk with them. After fifteen minutes, a bell will ring, and the executives will excuse themselves to sit at the next tables. This will be repeated so that tables have opportunities to talk to multiple executives during the afternoon.

After the opening remarks conclude, an executive comes to sit at our table. He is about 50 years old, white, and introduces himself as an associate deputy minister (ADM). He starts by saying that he would prefer if our table approached the fifteen minutes as a ‘group conversation’, rather than ‘an interview’.

That would be good for me. Conversations are easier than interviews. I can be confident in a conversation!

To begin, one of the participants asks him “if he had any advice for his past self”. I think the ADM was anticipating this question (he began his response with “Right, of course”). He answered relatively quickly, telling the table that he wished someone had reminded him that a career is a long time. “Thirty years is a long period of time to do one thing, and even when you do a variety of things it’s a long time to spend on one goal”. The answer was made with silence. The person who asked received the response with a nod, mouthed ‘thank you’, wrote something down and looked around the table.

I feel brave. I ask: “is it weird, the shift in how people talk to you once you become an executive?”. He laughs, and I can feel the eyes of the other people at the table look at me, and then back to him.

“So weird,” he responds. “It’s the weirdest thing. Sometimes I have to be careful, because now, whenever I say anything, I know there will be at least a couple of people who hear what I say and take it as a direction, or what I want. Sometimes I just want to bounce ideas around, and sometimes I say things and they are bad ideas, and no one wants to tell me that. People don’t often address me using my first name, either.” He shrugs his shoulders, and the group laughs.

He asks us, “well, why are you all here? Can I ask you that question instead?” The table laughs politely at the role reversal. The student with the midterm answers that she is here to network, and the rest of the table nods. The executive laughs and prompts for more. The student follows with “I think a lot of us just don’t even know *how* to network.” Again, the table nods.

The executive shares some advice on how he views networking: Networking can be challenging. He explains that no one really says that networking is a fancy way of saying “meet people”. Meeting people includes getting to know them a bit beyond what they’re working on. “You want positive connections with people who are interesting, and who are working on things you may find interesting or may not. The secret is that they could move around, or work on something different. You want to be known as someone that is nice, positive, or funny, or quick witted, or engaging, or whatever! If you ever need anything or need to move, you know someone who is also working, who may be in a position to take a chance on you. And you never know when you may re-cross paths.”

The table has relaxed a bit; things feel more comfortable after this response. The vision-impaired man raises his hand and asks, “What do you look for when hiring younger employees?” The executive laughs but takes longer to answer. He seems less comfortable with this question, for some reason. Maybe he was not expecting it.

“Well, I don’t do a lot of hiring myself these days”, he says. He goes on to explain that though he is not responsible for staffing, that he thinks attitude is important. “You know, sometimes I think there’s an idea out there that we deserve to be here, but it’s not really true. Every day, like as we work, or come to work, whatever, we earn our keep”, he

continues. Now, the table looks confused – I feel confused, but think he is saying that a good attitude and a reliable work ethic will get you far. I am inclined to agree.

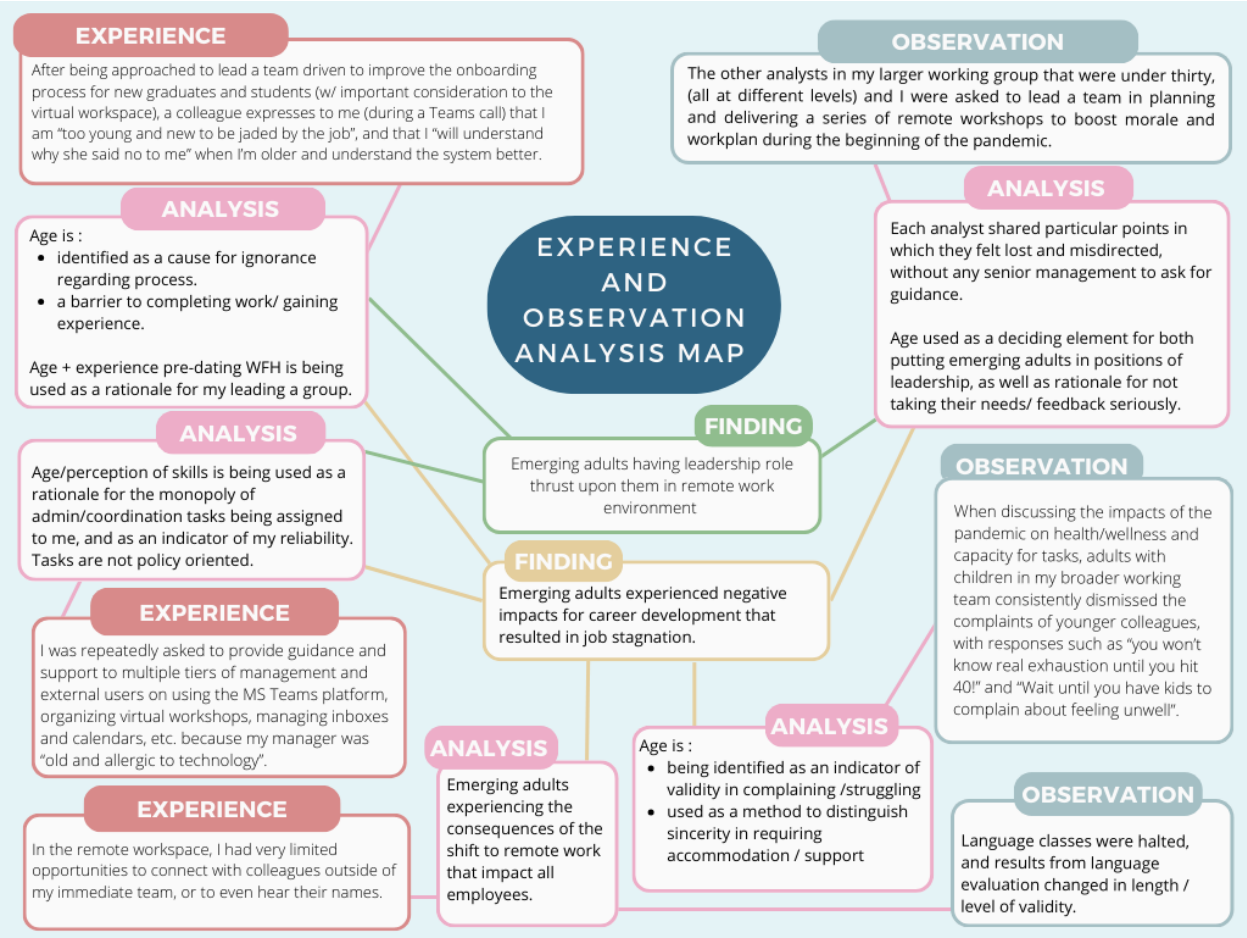
However, the executive does not explain what a ‘good attitude’ entails, nor the connection between ‘earning your keep’ and being a good candidate as a young professional.

The bell rings, the fifteen minutes have ended. I think the table is disappointed. For the students, I think it must be frustrating to not receive advice on how to better your chances at being hired on permanently.

The executive gets up, says thank you, and quietly walks away to his next table.

In retrospect, I remember that executives above a certain level may feel removed from interacting with younger professionals. I wonder if he felt uncomfortable because he was not confident in his last response but didn’t feel capable of giving a short ‘not applicable’-type answer. I guess I will never know.

Annex 7: Experience, Observation, and Interview Highlight Analysis Maps




INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS AND EXPERIENCE MAP
EXPERIENCE
Similarly, I had experienced multiple instances where I provided guidance, advice, and support to young office workers beginning their career in the remote setting, as I had started prior to the pandemic.
INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHT
When participants were asked to describe how they felt as an emerging adult in their office environment, every single one responded with self-positive talk. Elements included being quick to turn around taskings, leading by example for their team, being innovative and reliable, and self-sufficient in learning new skills.
ANALYSIS
Self-perception from emerging adults was indicative of embodying the leadership role presented to them via the remote work environment, identified in their abilities to research technical skills and apply them to work, as well as recognizing the trust their team placed in them.
INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHT
Experiences shared by participants included instances in which they helped other emerging adults adjust to the working environment and providing advice on what to expect.
THEME
Emerging adults having leadership role thrust upon them in remote work environment
ANALYSIS
The shift to remote workspace impacted the community of practice within in which newly hired emerging adults become established and leading members.
THEME
Emerging adults experienced negative impacts for career development that resulted in job stagnation.
ANALYSIS
Young professional networks and other forums for connection were being sought out for opportunities to relate to one another, demonstrating an acknowledgement for the shift if in Community of Practice/shift in which 'experts' (i.e. other young professionals) were being consulted as a resource.
ANALYSIS
Participants shared that when feeling judged or condescended to while self-advocating, it was because their issues were not considered to be significant in comparison to older employees.
INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHT
When participants were asked to describe how they felt perceived by others as an emerging adult in their office environment, every single one responded with negative sentiments. Elements included feeling isolated from networking opportunities, being left off of taskings that could contribute to skill development required for promotions, and feeling judged for trying to advocate for themselves.
INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHT
Participants shared that they were grateful for Young Professional Networks and other informal groups that connect younger employees together so that they have methods to network and receive support.

Annex 8: Conclusion – Findings and Limitations

Findings

The principle finding of this research is that emerging adults working in remote and hybrid work environments as a result of COVID-19 experienced a shift that both positioned them as leaders and paused/negatively impacted their capacity for professional development.

Emerging Adults and Leadership

The leadership roles that are highlighted for emerging adults within the scope of this research are twofold: primarily, office employees who were emerging adults were tasked with activities that helped teach others how to navigate or use the technology required during the remote- and hybrid- work environments that resulted from COVID-19. Secondly, emerging adults that were employed in office environments prior to the onset of the pandemic were leading other emerging adults in their onboarding/transition to office work while fully remote.

Though I experienced a significant increase in the amount of taskings that were administrative and logistical while WFH, these tasks were often highly technical. Often, they involved troubleshooting connection issues or formatting issues for other colleagues or related to the navigation of software. In my experience, these tasks were handed to me because of my ability to operate software (or quickly learn/know where to look to problem-solve).

Completing these tasks contributed to a cycle: if I could solve the problem/complete the task, then it affirmed to my manager that I was capable and could handle more of this work going forward. In the case that I could not solve a task, the

solution was often to dump the project and approach it in a different way, rather than seek out someone who may know better than I (someone who works in Information Technology, for example). As a result, I became a leader for my colleagues to help them figure out their technical needs.

The mandate to WFH began 10 months into my first full-time year working in my role. While remote work was an isolating experience, there were certain forums that tried to continue to operate, one being the Young Professional's Network (YPN).

After a few months of WFH, my department's YPN shared an invitation calling out to new prospective members. At this meeting, multiple newly hired young professionals shared that this role was their first office role, and they joined after the inception of the pandemic.

Over the next few months, it was very common that I, along with other young professionals that had joined prior to the pandemic, offered some words of advice to others. This advice often took the shape of describing how certain processes had changed with the WFH mandate or sharing methods of networking that they had not been introduced to.

Stunting Professional Development

The shift to remote work resulted in emerging adults[8] being tasked with work that was outside the scope of their responsibilities, or otherwise not being tasked with work that was within the scope of their duties *and* contributing to gaining experience to grow in

their role. This is noted as being tasked to troubleshoot technical issues, train others in using software on the computer, take on administrative and logistical tasks.

Though it is understandable that certain limitations to professional growth and skills development may have impacted office workers across the board (i.e., regardless of their age/phase of development).

However, for emerging adults relatively new to their career, the isolation in combination with altered tasks were considerably limiting. The path to career growth forks between reaching out to a network of professionals to explore new career options or apply to new opportunities by filling out questionnaires/applications that demonstrate skills and experience. It should be taken into consideration that for more senior employees, it is likely that they have had the opportunity to build a network, had time to develop skills, and/or have cultivated a knowledgebase to know where to go/who to reach out to in order to continue growing.

In my experience, after over a year of remote work, I felt very stuck in my position. Isolated, and with no professional opportunities to change/grow, I made the decision to return to school and do research. When returning to education, I did not expect to be writing about my experiences at work! My choice to pursue a Master's degree was decided when I examined my options and found that returning to school and getting a graduate degree may be a third option that could impact my ability to develop skills and help me access new career opportunities.

Additional Finding

While doing fieldwork, I noted that there was passion and enthusiasm to share experiences with me. Similarly, after wrapping up all the semi-structured interviews done with the participants, it was not uncommon that one would message me days or weeks later, to share new developments in the situations they had talked to me about, or to provide new examples of situations that perpetuated the feelings they shared with me during the interview.

Upon further reflection, I learned that by providing an opportunity to listen to them, this research provided an opportunity for participants and other individuals a mechanism to vent, and to feel heard and respected. Through venting, there was a cathartic release for colleagues that shared their stories with me. Further, I found that as I documented more experiences that were like mine, I also began to feel seen and acknowledged for labour that I felt was invisible to the eyes of those that supervised me. I hadn't realized I felt resentful until I started to *not* feel resentful.

I asked one participant if she had enjoyed being a participant for this research; her response was a 'yes', and she disclosed to me that beyond venting, there is the added benefit that "whoever gets a chance to hear about this work or read your paper may remember the feelings that people shared with you and be more considerate in the future".

Perhaps many were motivated to talk to me in thinking that they might be contributing to something that could better the experiences of other emerging adults in the workplace. I think there is something to be said about how these feed into the notion of communities of practice.

The emerging adults that were motivated to document their experience in hopes of better outcomes are thinking proactively about the potential novices (i.e., non-emerging-adult office workers) that may enter the community of practice related to training and interacting with emerging adult colleagues. This, to me, really exemplifies a way in which these emerging adults are positioned as leaders as a result of the changes that COVID-19 brought to the workplace.

It is relevant to note that a large portion of the entries and notes that I use in my fieldwork were created in moments of anger or frustration, which impacted my perspective when entering this research.

The findings of this research are not meant to suggest that there were no benefits to the WFH mandate, even for emerging adults. It is true that working remotely also allowed me time to read more, learn hobbies, and the flexibility I needed fit my M.A. course load into my schedule during the first year of the program.

It is an assumption that the experiences that I have lived and collected from participants, is applicable to the wider scope of emerging adults working in office environments during the pandemic.

Limitations

I struggled with how to present the information gleaned from these conversations and the semi-structured interviews that I conducted. The goal of this research is not to make a generalized statement about young people and how they feel about office work, but rather to listen to the experiences of others (noting their intonation, the words they

stress and emphasize, and to the overall rhythm of the story) and to gain insights about how being identified as an emerging adult is a present subjectivity in their experience.

The conversations I had with colleagues and peers often included details about their personal career journeys and their feelings surrounding their experience with office work and environments. It was critical that they felt comfortable to freely express themselves. It was important to me to honour those stories by being present in the conversation and documenting these shared moments and their outcomes.

Additionally, as a federal public servant, I was not permitted to share specific details about my work and department in this thesis. I met with Human Resources a few times to ensure that I would not cross any boundaries or create any conflicts of interest by pursuing this stream of research. This limited my ability to provide certain levels of detail or contextual information, and as such required a creative approach in documenting the research and its findings.

Annex 9: Discussion of Findings

IN THE STYLE OF A CORPORATE BRIEFING NOTE

CANDIDATE	Amanda Engineer
SUPERVISOR	Karine Vanthyune
PURPOSE OF ANNEX	To summarize how these research findings provide anthropological insights to concepts such as *emerging adult* and *the generational subject*.
SECTION OVERVIEW	1. Research findings and anthropological insights 2. Ageism in the workplace and COVID-19

SUMMARY

- COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a unique social environment that relied and thrived on the capabilities of digital programming.
- Emerging adults leaving/or having recently left education were joining a unique labour market, already saturated with office positions, that recently transitioned to being mostly remote.
- This research can be used to understand the ways in which the generational subjects of Millennial and Generation Z demonstrate values and behaviours in their work environment that are informing/indicative of their transition from emerging adult to adult.
- Despite the obtainment of some 'adult' milestones, including financial independence and the capacity for moral relativism, **these emerging adults still expressed that they felt stuck and limited in their development.**
- It's possible that 'adulthood' as a subjective, embodied experience could be defined by obtaining (limited) control and agency in life and feeling respected in one's own authority.
- As the post-industrial, North American labour market is saturated with beaurocratic/hierarchical organizations, the phase "emerging" adult may continue to become prolonged, as 'milestones' of development become harder to obtain.

Section 1: Ageism in the workplace and COVID-19

Section 2: Anthropological insights relating to *emerging adults* and the life-course

AGEISM IN THE WORKPLACE AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

- Federal public servants represent approximately 9.1% of the National Capital Region (NCR)'s population in total, and approximately 13.7% of the NCR's working-age population (aged 15-64 years old) (Treasury Board Secretariat, 2022).
- The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a mandatory shift to remote-workplaces for many people and businesses in Ottawa. A majority of those that did not shift to a remote-workplace experienced job loss, insecurity, or significantly reduced hours of operation.
- Businesses that stayed open during COVID included front-line necessities, such as grocery stores and big box stores, malls, healthcare organizations and centres.
    - Teenagers and emerging adults were among many that occupied these frontline positions, most notably in grocery stores, box stores, and malls.
    - Those that were not working were experiencing the socio-economic impacts of a critically limited labour market.
- The pandemic resulted in isolation of many forms. People may remember having a 'bubble' of social interaction and having forms of mobilization (even on micro-levels, such as going for a walk or drive) being policed and informed by public health guidelines.
- As a result of this physical isolation, there was a significant uptake in digital forms of communication. Facetime, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other video/telecommunication programs skyrocketed in their use across all cohorts.
    - Many children became used to digital interaction as normative (e.g., only knowing their grandparents through Facetime interactions, or entering education at a time that exclusively used virtual education platforms).
    - Many youth and young adults had to help older and/or less tech-savvy friends and family adjust to virtual methods of communication or interaction.
- Data from Statistics Canada shows that young Canadians were more affected by the 2020 labour market downturn than older Canadians (Morissette 2021).
    - During the pandemic, youth unemployment increased substantially.
    - By 2020, the unemployment rates of young men and young women in Canada stood at 15.5% and 13.7%, respectively[7].
    - Young men and women who were not in school full-time saw their unemployment rates rise by approximately 6% from 2019 to 2020. Their counterparts aged 31-44, or ages 45-54 saw increases that varied 2-3%.
- There is a significant correlation between attaining a higher education and increased employment (and income) levels.
    - During the pandemic, Millennial- and Generation Z-cohort emerging adults were in (a notably modern) life-course stage in which they sought financial

independence and chose to leave formal education to participate in the labour market.

- There is an advantage to being a digital native, entrant to a temporal labour market in which job security is closely linked with the skills and competencies required to complete remote work.
- Despite being relied upon in a role that acknowledges these skills, the exploitation of emerging adults' technological proficiency results in a monopolization of daily tasks and activities.
- These emerging adults, who aim to professionally develop and earn higher incomes cannot excel. The opportunities they have to learn role-specific competencies is limited.

SECTION 2

ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS RELATING TO *EMERGING ADULTS* AND THE LIFE-COURSE

- This thesis project investigated how **emerging adults** working in office environments experience their work and work environment, with consideration given to the impact of the concurring COVID-19 pandemic.
- The research findings included a shared commonality between emerging adults; expected workload being replaced/disrupted with tasks relating to technological administration, repair, or navigation **with a direct correlation to a lack of skill/ability in other colleagues**.
- Emerging adults that began working in their roles prior to the onset of the remote work transition of 2020 also **noted an increase in work activities relating to the mentorship or counselling of other emerging adults** that began their roles during the remote-work environment.
- Emerging adults experiencing this shift in leadership also **noted a limitation to their professional growth**.
    - The COVID-19 pandemic limited mobility, and halted certain initiatives aimed at helping workers develop outside of their daily tasks (e.g., language trainings)
    - Emerging adults noted that their daily work activities became unaligned from critical experiences/skills required for development.

On the 'emerging adult' and the generational subject

- Though Arnett (2000), Smith et al. (2011), and other scholars focus on emerging adults in ways that suggest that this phase of life is dynamic and subjective, they tend to cap their studies and research around ages 18 to 25.
- The findings of this thesis corroborate that emerging adulthood is a subjective and dynamic phase of life, that those up to age 29 (and likely into their 30s) are still experiencing.
    - While this may be related to the ongoing prolonging of certain markers of adulthood (e.g., people are staying in school longer, delaying marriage, living in the parental home longer, etc.), it is also indicative that the transition to adulthood is very independently reflexive, and the reaching of adulthood can be understood as a process of mental undertaking.
- Smith et. al. (2011) note that moralistic individuality is present in many emerging adults, shaping their relationships with others and the world around them. They posit that this "pseudo respect" for different beliefs is a form of passive tolerance, which limits the moral imagination that is required for contemporary adulthood.
- In my experience, moral individualism is present in the emerging adults of this research in so far that many would agree that they cannot judge others for 'immoral' behaviour without a deeper understanding of a person's context. However, in the context of the participants of the research **there were stronger**

displays of moral relativism, that counted-in the "unchangeable realities" that studded their paths.

- This research focused on emerging adults in the National Capital Region working in office positions. Though participants have minorly varied socio-economic backgrounds there was significant overlap, and therefore provides relatively limited insight into the experiences of emerging adults. Participants of this research are varied in their achievement of adult-marking milestones.
- All participants in this research had jobs that provide the opportunity for financial independence. Further, some participants also have obtained more traditional markers of adulthood (e.g., home ownership, cohabitating with a partner, left education).
- Arnett (2000) includes the ability and capacity to make independent decisions as a milestone of adulthood. In their position, the emerging adults of this research are limited in the ability to make independent decisions in scope of their subject-matter, as their focus is on other work and delays the development of their subject-matter expertise.
- The generational subject is made through a formative process, by cohort, that is reflected in their personality, values, beliefs, and behaviours.
    - Research surrounding generational theory suggests that generational cohorts experience differences in their values and behaviours based on a multitude of factors, specific to the time and place that they grow up.
- For example, in their article *Generation Y's Ethical Ideology and Its Potential Workplace Implications*, VanMeter et. al (2013) note that Generation Y (aka Millennials) commonly have expectations to quickly progress into positions of leadership and share a desire/liking to collaborative work.
    - These trends in behaviour for Millennials and Gen. Z is corroborated in the research findings; emerging adults understand their positionality as unacknowledged tech and peer mentors/leaders.
    - The desire for collaboration is corroborated as well, in the demonstrated desire for emerging adults to congregate with one another to vent and express themselves.
        - It's possible that the desire for collaborative work stems from a driving desire to collaborate with people that understand their unique experiences (i.e., others of the same generation or within the same life-course stage).
- It's possible that **each generational cohort may have unique milestones that mark the transition from adolescence into adulthood,** and that cultural relativity extends to generation as well.
- Further, VanMeter et. al's (2013) study suggests that Millenials may be more aligned with servant leadership styles, in which the leader serves the needs of their subordinates, getting them what they need to accomplish their work.
    - This preference, in conjunction with the often bureaucratic- or autocratic-styles of leadership in office work, would lend itself to a style of work that is already difficult to adjust to.
- This perspective on the transition to adulthood further supports the notion that age parameters do not fit or add to its definition — they may only complicate it. If

the transition to adulthood is marked by socio-economic, socio-cultural, or even socio-psychological milestones, then its logical to place the emphasis on the *social.*

- This is not to say that 'adult' as a life-stage course does not exist. The defined 'adult' has many other implications used for biological, medical, and legal practices.
- It may serve as commentary that **our post-industrial society continues to rely on and support bureaucratic institutions and workplaces, under which very few people can make 'independent' decisions. And further, that this situation contributes to a social order that continues to 'delay' adulthood due to a multitude of barriers, in which some never achieve financial independence, never cohabitate with a partner, or never have children).**
    - From this perspective, a transition to adulthood may never, following Arnett and others' point of view, be actualized by certain individuals.
- Therefore, there is a possibility that **'adulthood' can be understood as having control and agency in life** (e.g., financial independence, moving away from the parental home, etc.), **while feeling respected in one's own authority** (e.g., obtaining an educational credential, being a parent to children, etc.)
- In my experience, **Millennial and Gen Z do exhibit a desire for agency and respect but feel frustrated in their inability to accomplish this**.
    - In relation to their expected path (i.e., the job they were hired for), they are experiencing a lack of control in the types of tasks they are receiving, and feeling like those tasks don't respect the skills and competencies that they have/are needing to develop for their career.
    - In the altered-task, COVID reality, these emerging adults had no control in the types of tasks they were assigned, were extremely limited in opportunity for mobility (due to a variety of factors) and felt a lack of respect in that they were being tasked based on a presumption of their ability due to age, rather than skill.

References

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. 2000. *Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties.* The American Psychologist 55, no.5. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469

Benedict, Ruth Fulton. 1934*. Patterns of Culture*. New York: New American Library.

Boas, Franz. 1888. *The Central Eskimo*. Washington: G.P.O..

Canadian Institute for Health Information. 2022. *Canadian COVID-19 Intervention Timeline.*https://www.cihi.ca/en/canadian-covid-19-intervention-timeline

Cremonesi, Laura. 2016. *Foucault and the making of subjects*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd.

Deng, et. Al. 2020. *Running the Economy Remotely: Potential for Working from Home During and After COVID-19.* COVID-19: Data to Insights for a Better Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00026-eng.pdf?st=oqIHNLGo

Dunseith, Bradley. 2020. ON FAILING TO LEARN TO SHOOT A GUN. In “Search After Method: Sensing, Moving, and Imagining in Anthropological Fieldwork”, edited by Julie Laplante, Ari Gandsman, and Willow Scobie, 1st ed., 40:188–98. Berghahn Books. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv21hrfw3.16.

Foucault, Michel. 2001*. Power.* Edited by James D. Faubion. Translated by Robert Hurley. London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press.

Hansen, Kelsey, and Anne Noyes Saini. 2023. *A Brief History of the Modern Office.* Harvard Business Review.https://hbr.org/2020/07/a-brief-history-of-the-modern-office.

Hershatter, Andrea, and Molly Epstein. 2010. Millennials and the World of Work: An Organization and Management Perspective. Journal of Business and Psychology 25, no. 2: 211–23. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-010-9160-y.

Kapoor, Camille, and Nicole Solomon. 2011.Understanding and Managing Generational Differences in the Workplace. Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes 3, no. 4: 308–18. https://doi.org/10.1108/17554211111162435.

Mead, Margaret. 1928. *Coming of age in Samoa; a psychological study in Primitive Youth for western civilisation*. New York: W. Morrow & Company.

René Morissette. 2021. *Chapter 2: Youth Employment in Canada.* Portrait of Youth in Canada: Data Report. Statistics Canada. Online. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/42-28-0001/2021001/article/00002-eng.htm

Prensky, Marc. 2001. Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants. On the Horizon 9, no. 5: 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816.

Schwartz, Seth J., James E. Côté, and Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. 2005. *Identity and Agency in Emerging Adulthood: Two Developmental Routes in the Individualization Process.* Youth & Society 37, no. 2: 201–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X05275965 .

Skinner, Diane. 2013. Foucault, Subjectivity and Ethics: Towards a Self-Forming Subject. Organization (London, England) 20, no. 6: 904–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508412460419.

Smith, Christian, et al. *Lost in Transition the Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Statistics Canada. 2024. *Millennials now outnumber baby boomers in Canada*. Government of Canada. The Daily. Statistics Canada https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240221/dq240221a-eng.htm

*Statistics Canada. 2020. *Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 1: Impacts of COVID-19 on job security and personal finances, 2020.* The Daily. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11-001-X. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

**Statistics Canada. 2020. *Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 2: Monitoring the effects of COVID-19, May 2020.*Statistics Canada, Government of Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200604/dq200604b-eng.htm

Statistics Canada. 2022. *Marriage: 'I Do'? More like 'I Don't.'* Statistics Canada, Government of Canada. https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/2507-marriage-i-do-more-i-dont.

Statistics Canada. 2023. *Custom Table – Census of Population 2021.* Census Profile. Statistics Canada, Government of Canada. Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E

Treasury Board Secretariat. 2022. *Demographic Snapshot of Canada's Public Service.* Treasury Board Secretariat.https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/innovation/human-resources-statistics/demographic-snapshot-federal-public-service-2023.html

Treasury Board Secretariat. 2024. *Population of the federal public service in the National Capital Region.* Population of the federal public service for the National Capital Region - Canada.ca

VanMeter, R. A. et al. 2013. *Generation Y's Ethical Ideology and Its Potential Workplace Implications.* Journal of business ethics. Online. 117 (1), 93–109. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1505-1

Walls, Fiona. 2009. *Of Subjects, Subjectivity, and Subjectification: Subjects Made Visible*. In: Mathematical Subjects. Springer, Boston, MA. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-0597-0_1

Wang, W. 2022. *The COVID-19 pandemic and gross domestic product per capita growth in Canada.* Statistics Canada.https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2022005/article/00002-eng.htm

Wisenthal, M. 2014. *Section W: Education.* Historical statistics of Canada. Statistics Canada, Government of Canada.https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-516-x/sectionw/4147445-eng.htm.