

Why Teenagers without Summer Jobs Risk Social Failure

One of the most fascinating aspects of the new documentary [Becoming Bond](#) is how a summer job led to George Lazenby landing the role of James Bond.

In the early 1950s, Lazenby, an Australian teenager, got a job as a used car salesman. Lazenby would go on to become a model and eventually play James Bond in 1969's *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. As *Becoming Bond* shows, the persistence, presentation, self-confidence and determination Lazenby learned while selling cars were crucial attributes that allowed him to land the role of Bond.

This is a great example of the dividends that can accrue from a simple summer job, which was once a historic rite of passage but is now becoming rare. *Bloomberg* recently [reported](#), "In July of last year, 43 percent of 16-to-19-year-olds were either working or looking for a job. That's 10 points lower than in July 2006. In 1988 and 1989, the July labor force participation rate for teenagers nearly hit 70 percent."

The Bureau of Labor Statistics expects the teen labor force participation rate to drop below twenty-seven percent in 2024, or thirty points lower than the peak seasonally adjusted rate in 1989.

Bloomberg [cites](#) a study claiming that teenagers' increased emphasis on schooling is eating away at the teenage summer job. Yet teens who avoid work to study are ironically missing the kind of life experience that can make them successful. Growing up in the 1980s, as I did, the decision to get a summer job (starting at the age of fourteen) was an easy one. If you didn't have a summer job you didn't have money. Period. My father was a kind and generous man who would occasionally

slip me \$20 for “walking around money,” but aside from that I was on my own. When I’d excitedly tell him I was spending a weekend at the beach or that the Rolling Stones were coming to town, the response was always the same: “That sounds great. You’ve got money for that, right?”

But it was also about more than just earning money. A summer job taught me how to interact with many different kinds of people, acquiring social skills that, like George Lazenby, would benefit me throughout life. When I was fifteen I worked as a bag boy at a local grocery store, and every day I had to deal with hundreds of customers. Some of them could be demanding, unreasonable, and annoying, but calmly explaining the store’s policies to them or apologizing for a screw-up taught me about patience, conflict resolution, and pride in doing a job correctly and responsibly.

As well, there were people I met on the job who affected my life in ways that never would have happened had I not worked in the summers. When I was a bag boy, a construction worker named George would always come by for his lunch hour and sit outside near where I was loading bags of groceries into cars. He was older than me and knew a lot about women, a subject I knew very little about. George would sit there smoking a cigarette and drinking a Coke and philosophizing and giving tips about the fairer sex. There were the men from the barber shop next door who used to stop by the store to talk about sports and life. Or the girl at the hardware store who years later became my landlord. Or the local TV sportscaster who stopped by for dinner supplies and gave me advice about getting into journalism.

The summer job was part of an entire social and economic ecosystem that helped prepare me for adult life – not just economic adult life but social and spiritual adult life.

A few months ago, there were layoffs at a media group I was working for, and it was telling how different the reactions

among the staffers were. Younger workers freaked out, crying and panicking as they scampered to their cars towing a box of their stuff. The older people were much more calm, quietly talking, laughing, and heading out for beers. Walking to our cars, a male colleague and I compared notes on jobs we had had in life – bartender, theater usher, bag boy, pool cleaner, painter, summer factory worker, etc. It wasn't the end of the world. Hell, James Bond had even been a used car salesman once.

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