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Part-time jobs – are they worth the time and effort?

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Forever seen as a rite of passage from the life of a child to that of an adult, students' part-time jobs have sparked criticism, praise and debate over the past few years.

The question is whether a part-time job is more beneficial or detrimental to a student?

There are two sides to the debate. One side argues that 'wearing a paper hat' adds to a student's life experiences. Here the common refrain is that it makes students independent and teaches them the value of money.

Advocates of the other side feel that a job takes away from a student's academic and social life, both being important to the future success and well-being of the student.

The Ministry of Labour determined that 28 hours of work or less a week constitutes a part-time job, and that the minimum wage for students under 18 is \$6.25. However, wages range from as little as \$5 to close to \$11 an hour, depending on the job and the company.

Most of the students that I spoke to worked between 10 and 15 hours a week. Some spent close to 30 hours a week at work. These were the people missing out on a social life and whose marks were suffering.

The majority of these jobs require paper hats and smocks, usually in some hideous colour like bright orange or muddy brown, and about ten sizes too big.

The comic relief value for customers is something I can only guess at. Get them rolling in the aisles with laughter and they'll forget what they came in for, consequently buying much more than planned.

About 170,000 students in Ontario have a part-time job. Closer to home, in a 1992 survey by the Carleton Board of Education, 60 per cent of students in the area have what they describe as a part-time job. Twenty-five per cent of the 65,430 students surveyed worked more than 14 hours a week.

The type of job that a student has determines the hours and the money he or she receives. It also determines the shifts they take.

Often, students will have to work alone during the night shift. The level of personal safety that these employees have is questionable. What is a single employee to do in the event of an emergency? Ideally, there should be a panic alert button, akin to the ones that many banks have, supplying a direct link to the police.

Another method to increase safety during the night hours would be to increase the number of employees working. A mandatory minimum of two or more people should be instated. Think of the saying "there's safety in numbers." It's dimly common sense.

And although the majority of stores have a security system to deter and prevent crime, what is there to protect the lone student who is locking up the store after hours?

Perhaps stricter regulations as to how many and which hours a student works should be made and enforced. Minimum wage should be adhered to as well, as those who aren't unionized could be subject to the whims of their superiors.

The students that I spoke to were divided on the matter. There were some who felt that a job took too much away from "the experience of being a teenager." Some were worried about the effects on school work and their social life. Many agreed that they wouldn't be able to keep up with their school work or ever see their friends if they had a job, and that they would rather be without money than fail their classes.

Heather Carr, who holds a part-time job at a local grocery store, said her social life hasn't suffered. "There's a whole store full of people to see, but my marks have definitely gone down, due to the fact that I work all weekend."

Another student, who wished to remain anonymous, said: "I would quit, but the money is important right now and nothing else is really, really suffering."

Many students felt the same way, but when asked why they didn't quit their jobs in order to save their marks, replied that without the money, they would have a hard time going to university and keeping up with their day-to-day expenses.

Others have a job, sometimes working up to 20 hours a week, do extremely well in school and have an active social life. One student said that "it just fills up the time that I would otherwise spend watching T.V." Ian Chesal, an employee at Videoflicks, stated that "it (my job) hasn't hurt my marks or social life in any way, but then I have a lot of support from my family and friends."

The most common jobs were as cashiers, stocking shelves, or flipping burgers at a fast food place. None of the positions were the lifetime goal of the students who worked there. Some jobs were considered interesting, others said the only reason that they enjoyed working was because of the people at their place of employment. One girl commented that "I hate the job, my boss and the people I work with, but I need the money."

A job can add to stress, make time much more limited than it was while unemployed, and prompt a bit of juggling when it comes to your social life.

What, then, is the solution for students who need to work but whose marks are suffering?

Many said that the cost of university was their reason for working as many hours during the week as possible. Their solution was to drop the astronomical tuition fees to make further education a more reachable goal.

Students would have more hours to spend on their school work. And after all, higher grades usually lead to higher opportunities in life.

Depending on what type of person you are, you may or may not be able to stand the pressures that having a job, a social life and going to school require.

Then again, if you are organized, or if you are willing to try to be, a job could be the doorway to that extra bit of independence that so many of us are looking for. For some people, a job is an identity and a purpose.

So, back to the questions – will a job improve or destroy your life? Think about the good points, and the bad. Remember that you'll probably end up with a job sooner or later anyway. And don't let someone else tell you what to do. Whether you decide to work sooner or later is ultimately your decision.