



Youth Experiences and Future Needs in Learning and Working During COVID-19

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Adolescents and young adults have experienced significant impact as a result of COVID-19 with many schools and work places transitioning to online formats, altering procedures or closing completely. Notably, many youths are in a unique position as both employees and students. Our team was interested in understanding what has been difficult for youth in making these changes, what has worked well, and what would help them learn or work better. On May 8th, 2020, over 1,000 youth participants, aged 14–24, were asked about their experiences with learning and working during COVID-19.

Youth experienced significant changes to their education and work experiences during COVID-19

Most youth in our sample (68.3%) reported experiencing changes to their education and 39.5% reported changes to their work or financial situation. These experiences were not mutually exclusive as many young people are both students and workers, while some are neither.

Of the youth reporting school-related changes, 92.7% noted school to be online or cancelled completely when we surveyed in May, 2020. Many also described that learning was more difficult, grading had changed, and they experienced both decreased and/or increased

workload. Youth noted that school “is all online and dramatically harder because of it” or “My school is closed and all senior events have been canceled.”

Those who reported changes to work most commonly noted a shift to working from home (48.6%). Many youth also reported being out of work, being laid off, work closures, increased and/or decreased hours and responsibility, reduced income, and receiving unemployment benefits. More specifically, one participant noted that “For one month I was unemployed but now my office remains closed and I am working from home” while another mentioned “I’m not making any money because I don’t work.”

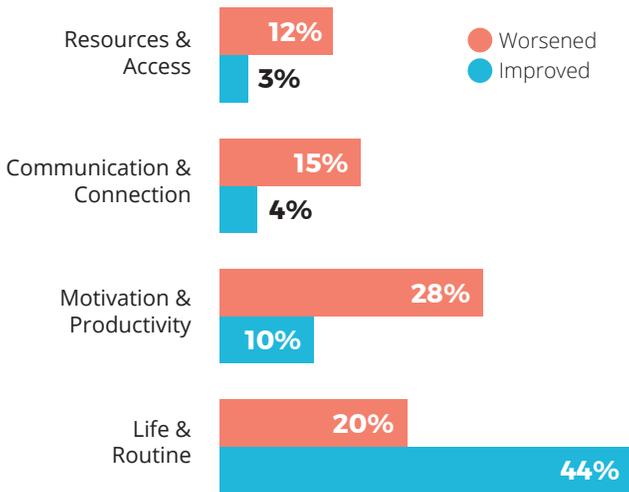
Youth reported reduced motivation, focus, and productivity when learning and working online

When reporting on difficulties with learning, many youth noted a lack of motivation, loss of focus, and reduced productivity while learning or working at home (28.9%). Some participants specifically noted that “It’s hard to stay motivated without a structured life” or “It’s been super hard to concentrate on work with my whole family home and hard to stay motivated when I don’t have to go to in person classes.”

“ my brain cannot switch from home=relaxing to home=learning and my motivation, time management skills, and ability to keep track of assignments and tests went completely out the window ”

A few youth (9.7%) did note improvement in their focus and productivity with learning and working online because “Working from home feels like less of a grind,” “working at my own pace allows me to be more productive with my time,” and “Less distractions makes it a little easier.”

Impact of COVID-19 on Learning/Working from Home



Nearly half of youth described improvement in their routine, work-life balance, and healthy habits when learning and working online

Nearly half the youth respondents (44.3%) reported that their routine and work-life balance had improved with the changes to their work or school. These participants noted that “It makes my schedule more flexible. I don’t have to take time to commute” and “I get more freedom and get more sleep.”

Some participants did not experience this benefit however and reported difficulties in adapting to a new routine and work-life balance (19.7%). Reasons for this included a “Lack of a daily routine, and an increase in the amount of work per week” and “I don’t have a physical separation between home and work.”

“ I’ve been able to structure my own learning time and budget in things like walks and exercise. I’ve been able to eat much more regularly and healthier. ”

Moving forward, youth need access to physical work spaces and technology, improved structure and routine, and better communication for successful virtual learning and work

Youth frequently (22.1%) cited a need for greater access to technology (computer, internet), a dedicated workspace or desk, and other resources such as a specific building or lab in order to improve learning or working from home. They reported: “A better internet connection and a more professional environment at home to remain focused in” and “A better desk and chair, maybe a quieter space to work.”

Youth also said in order to learn or work better from home, they must make changes to their lives and routines (18.8%) including better scheduling and structure, healthier habits, and being more patient and understanding toward themselves. These included, “I’d need to set more concrete goals with myself and better limitations,” “Managing my time and staying organized,” and “I think I mainly need to work on my mental health and taking care of myself.” Relatedly, some participants specifically mentioned needing more motivation or focus to improve their work or schooling: “I would need help focusing mostly and maybe some more motivation to do the work after a while.”

A number of others also explicitly noted that the format of online learning would need to be changed (17.6%). Participants suggested ideas like “more online assignments because lectures alone aren’t as effective,” “more one on one or live interaction rather than prerecording and also have specific deadlines,” and “Better support and clearer expectations and instructions.” Participants also reported they “need more reliable access to teachers” and to “connect with my peers” as well as noting that they are currently experiencing poor communication and social connections due to changes.

Implications

As many schools and work places continue virtually in the upcoming year it is important to consider methods to encourage engagement from youth and to provide access to the resources and workspace needed to help them succeed. Accessible modes of communication, clear scheduling, and deadlines from schools or supervisors are needed to maintain motivation and structure to improve youths’ experiences at home.

Needs of Youth to Improve Virtual Learning and Work

| Resources | Schedule and Routine | Communication |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computers & internet • Workspace or desk • Quiet environment • Books or other supplies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better time management • Organization & structure • Established daily routines • Motivation & focus • Healthier life habits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear deadlines & expectations • Improved communication • Structured workloads • Peer connection & support |

Data Source and Methods

Responses were collected using the MyVoice study, a national longitudinal text-message survey of youth. Participants were recruited via social media to participate in weekly open-ended surveys. Questions were iteratively developed by a research team including survey experts, mixed-methods experts, and youth resulting in the following: 1) How has your school/work changed because of the pandemic? 2) If you’ve had to make changes, what HAS NOT gone well with learning/working? 3) What HAS gone well with learning/working? 4) If stay-at-home orders were to continue or expand, what would you need to learn/work better? A total of 936 youth responded to the survey and responses were qualitatively assessed and categorized by two independent investigators to reach consensus. More information about the MyVoice study methodology is available at researchprotocols.org/2017/12/e247.

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