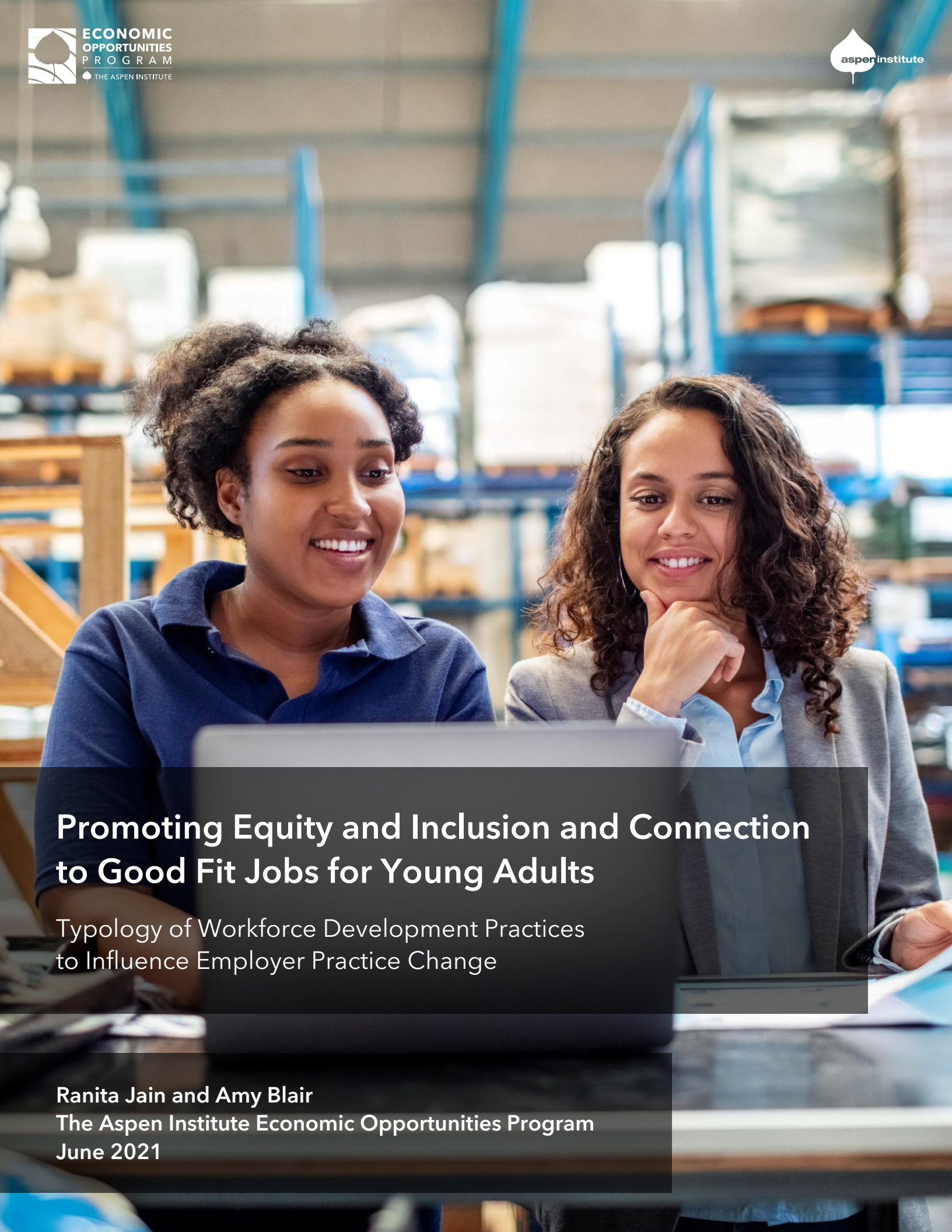




Promoting Equity and Inclusion and Connection to Good Fit Jobs for Young Adults

Typology of Workforce Development Practices
to Influence Employer Practice Change

Ranita Jain and Amy Blair
The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program
June 2021

The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program (EOP) advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. We recognize that race, gender, and place intersect with and intensify the challenge of economic inequality and we address these dynamics by advancing an inclusive vision of economic justice. For over 25 years, EOP has focused on expanding individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity. As a national partner to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Generation Work™ initiative, we are exploring new ways that workforce service providers are connecting young people — particularly young adults of color — with the knowledge, experience, and relationships necessary to succeed in today's job market.

Launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2015, Generation Work™ aims to connect more of America's young adults with meaningful employment by changing the way public and private systems prepare them for jobs. As part of the initiative, partners in five sites across the nation — Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and Seattle — are working to align various education, employment, and support services to help young people develop the skills required to succeed in the working world; link them with employers; and increase advancement and earning opportunities. By combining employer-facing strategies that are aligned to labor market needs with positive youth development techniques such as hands-on learning and mentoring, the initiative aims to blend services into more cohesive pathways that promote equitable employment opportunities for all young people.

The Generation Work initiative represents an important source of new learning as local partners experiment with a wide range of promising approaches to employer engagement. We would like to thank many people who made this publication possible. First, we deeply appreciate the workforce development professionals in Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and Seattle. We thank them for their candid reflections and for sharing valuable insights that informed this typology. We are grateful to Vivian Vazquez for her assistance at every stage of this research project and to Tony Mastria for designing and producing this report. We are grateful to Laura Burgher, Allison Gerber, and Sheila Maguire for supporting this work, and providing thoughtful input and feedback.

This research was funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Inc., and we thank them for their support; however, the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
What Is a Good Fit Job?.....	5
Working with Employers to Promote REI and Connection To Good Fit Jobs	6
Typology of Workforce Development Practices	6
Leveraging Political and Financial Incentives to Influence Employer Practice Change	7
Working with Anchor Institutions.....	8
Using Public Wage Subsidies	10
Leveraging Interest in Addressing Racial Inequities in Employment and Providing Resources	12
Walking Away from an Employer	14
Cultivating Connections Between Employers and Young Adults	15
Hosting Opportunities for Employers to Engage with Young Adults at Workforce Program Locations.....	16
Including Young Adults in Employer Meetings to Foster Mutual Understanding.....	17
Working with Employers to Change Practices from the Inside	18
Providing Feedback and Coaching to Supervisors as Part of Participant Retention Services, Post-Hire	19
Gathering and Relaying Worker Feedback to Supervisors and Managers.....	20
Providing Technical Assistance to Supervisors of Frontline Employees	21

Introduction

America's youngest workers, especially young workers of color, have taken a hard hit from COVID-19. In addition to education and career plans upended by the pandemic, huge numbers of the jobs young workers held pre-pandemic disappeared overnight. Although unemployment overall is starting to ease as the economy begins to recover, millions of young people remain unattached to either school or the labor market. The Center for Law and Social Policy and the Center on Education and Labor at New America recently [reported](#) that pandemic unemployment rates for young people, especially for young people of color, have been brutal.¹ Strategies to connect young adults to jobs that set them up for success now and into the future are urgently needed, and employers play a critical role.

Prior to the pandemic, local partners participating in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's multiyear Generation Work initiative were rethinking their practices and exploring new approaches to engaging employers. A primary goal of their work is to connect large numbers of young adults, particularly people of color, to "good fit" jobs that allow them to earn income and gain positive work experiences [see box]. But they have other important objectives as well, including:

- Influencing (and helping) employers to adopt equitable employment practices
- Influencing employers to make workplace practice changes that expand the number of good fit jobs
- Understanding a company's inner workings and their changing and emerging needs, and suggesting workforce changes that benefit employees and the business

- Shifting employer mindsets around hiring and developing young people, particularly young adults of color
- Demonstrating the broader value of workforce providers to employers beyond staff recruitment

Some of the work needed to make progress on these important objectives can be characterized as traditional workforce development: helping people get jobs. Supporting young people who face systemic challenges transitioning into the labor market is challenging work in the best of times. Challenges can include encountering employer biases based on race and ethnicity as well as experiencing the effects of systemic inequities in the education, workforce, and criminal justice systems. We've seen how workforce programs' efforts to advance equity, inclusion, and developmental objectives have required deeper relationship building with employers and expansion of the range of approaches they use to learn about employers and build these relationships.

Over the years, we've conducted research to learn about workforce development practices in many communities and different types of organizations across the US, and we've heard firsthand how challenging employer engagement is for many workforce professionals. The Generation Work initiative represented an important source of new learning as local partners experimented with a wide range of promising approaches to employer engagement. We've mined learning from our research visits and interviews with Generation Work local partner leaders and frontline staff to identify and organize a variety of examples of their engagement into a working typology of practices organized into three categories (see chart).

¹ <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/briefs/building-back-better-a-national-plan-for-youth-employment/>

- Leveraging political and financial incentives to influence employer practice change
- Cultivating connections between employers and young adults to influence employer practices
- Working with employers to change practices from the inside

Our hope is that this approach to describing the practical work of employer engagement will not only be helpful but also aspirational to readers who seek to expand good fit jobs in their communities. And, that workforce practitioners, in particular, can identify ways they can proactively engage with employers around supporting equity and inclusion in the workplace. Having said this, we recognize that this typology and examples from Generation Work, while rich, do not represent the totality of employer engagement tactics. We welcome input from readers to help us build this body of work with examples from your own experiences.

We also hope that this typology is helpful for readers who invest in and develop policies to support highly effective young adult workforce development. As you read, you will likely see

that the “work” of workforce development and employer engagement to promote equitable good fit jobs for young adults is complex and requires knowledge, skills, and staff time that are not typically built into funding models for youth and young adult development or workforce development. Practitioners spend considerable effort identifying, maintaining, and cultivating relationships with employers. And, not just relationships with one employer representative at a company, but at multiple levels, such as HR, hiring managers, supervisors, and workplace mentors. Practitioners are also offering valuable expertise and bringing employers along an equity learning path, and they usually do this work free of charge. To work effectively with employers toward goals of good fit jobs, workplace equity and inclusion requires practitioners to provide ongoing engagement and support to both employer representatives and young adults. One local partner commented that *“there’s great misalignment in what we’re paid to do, and what this work takes.”* We hope this typology will inform investment and policy work to prioritize, shape, and resource broader uptake of the types of approaches young adults need to succeed at work.

What Is a Good Fit Job?

Based on a [2015 national survey](#) of youth and young adult workforce service professionals representing 340 organizations, employers that provide “good fit” jobs have the following characteristics:

- They provide employment (not contract work) and pay self-sufficiency level wages
- They have supportive supervisory practices and are willing to mentor in the workplace
- They can expose young adults to a variety of responsibilities
- They offer a welcoming and safe environment where mistakes are acknowledged as part of a learning process
- Their scheduling practices are supportive of a young adult’s personal needs, such as public transportation schedules, school schedules, and childcare responsibilities

Working with Employers to Promote REI and Connection To Good Fit Jobs

Typology of Workforce Development Practices

Category	Practices
Leveraging Political and Financial Incentives to Influence Employer Practice Change Practitioners leverage incentives (e.g., community benefits agreements, public funding, etc.) in their work with employers to influence employers' hiring and advancement practices	Working with anchor institutions who are involved in public agreements that guide worker hiring and advancement Using a public wage subsidy to negotiate expectations about workplace practices and worker experience on the job Leveraging employer interest in addressing racial inequities in employment and providing resources to help them promote race, equity, and inclusion (REI) Walking away from an employer who doesn't demonstrate commitment to its workforce
Cultivating Connections Between Employers and Young Adults to Influence Employer Practices Employers meet young adults and understand first-hand their assets, motivations, and experiences. This engagement has been shown to influence how employers recruit, retain and advance young workers	Hosting opportunities for employers to engage with young adults at their program location and to experience the climate and culture fostered by workforce organizations Including young adults in employer meetings (e.g., industry collaborative or roundtable meetings) to foster conversations and mutual understanding
Working with Employers to Change Practices from the Inside Practitioners work directly with employers to encourage and influence employer practice changes – including how young adults are onboarded, trained, mentored, and supervised at work	Providing feedback and coaching to supervisors as part of participant retention services, post-hire Gathering and relaying worker feedback to supervisors and managers Providing technical assistance to supervisors of frontline employees

Leveraging Political and Financial Incentives to Influence Employer Practice Change

“The Port of Seattle’s leadership and commitment toward advancing diversity, equity and inclusion has helped in our work to influence employers to offer jobs that support inclusion and stability for residents in the SeaTac community.” - Port Jobs Executive Director, Seattle WA



In many communities, employer leaders may have multiple incentives – financial, political, and social incentives – to work with workforce practitioners. For example, employers may be bound to community benefits hiring agreements for populations of workers who live in designated neighborhoods or have specified demographic characteristics. Another incentive could be addressing the need to bring in a new, diverse workforce to support business survival and growth objectives. And employers may want to be better leaders in their community and offer jobs that promote inclusion and opportunities for young adults. In all these examples, workforce practitioners can be valuable partners and can leverage these employer incentives to influence hiring and advancement practices on behalf of young adults.

Strategies include:

- Working with anchor institutions who are involved in public benefits agreements that guide worker hiring and advancement
- Using a public wage subsidy to negotiate expectations about workplace practices and worker experience on the job
- Leveraging employer interest in addressing racial inequities in employment and providing resources to help promote equity and inclusion
- Walking away from an employer who doesn’t demonstrate commitment to its workforce

Working with Anchor Institutions

“Our partnership with University Hospital works well because they are aligned with our goals around hiring AND advancement.” – Towards Employment Director commenting on partnership with Cleveland’s University Hospital on the STEP-UP program.

Anchor institutions – such as universities, financial organizations, and healthcare institutions – are employers that may ‘anchor’ a community’s economy – as a large, local employer as well as a purchaser of goods and services. For a variety of reasons – location, social mission, tax incentives, reputation – some anchor institutions may be involved in local hiring agreements or other community-based efforts that set employment goals for residents who live in economically disadvantaged communities. Workforce practitioners may find opportunities to work closely with anchor employers and help advance their work to support economic inclusion. In addition to being a recruiting source for local talent, there are a range of ways that workforce providers can engage with anchor employers, including:

- Identifying and jointly designing local career pathways in high growth local jobs
- Supporting work-based learning and other workforce training programs
- Addressing barriers to employment, such as certain criminal records, driver licenses or education requirements
- Supporting or advocating for transportation solutions that affordably and reliably meet the needs of workers
- Providing training for supervisors of entry-level workers
- Helping a business source local procurement of goods and services
- Championing and supporting other anchor institution initiatives

In each of the activities mentioned above, workforce practitioners are cultivating deep relationships with employers and influencing important changes to business practices that are not only tailored to the needs of young adults, but also support economic stability and inclusion for the broader workforce.

Spotlight on Generation Work Partner

Port Jobs is a workforce intermediary that works in close partnership with the Port of Seattle to connect King County residents to jobs, training opportunities, and career advancement within the airport, trade, logistics, construction and maritime sectors. With a location at SeaTac Airport, Port Jobs offers comprehensive programming to job seekers and airport workers, including airline service workers, retail, food service and other occupations. In addition to providing career placement services, Port Jobs operates Airport University – which, in partnership with two community colleges, provides credit-bearing courses at the airport with class topics and times that fit airport worker and employer needs.

Through their partnership, both the Port of Seattle and Port Jobs are able to advance commonly shared goals to prioritize the hiring and advancement of workers who are residents in the low-income and highly diverse communities surrounding the airport.

Port Jobs is actively engaged in regular airport employer meetings and discussions with incoming tenants, including efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in airport employment. Through this engagement, Port Jobs has influenced employers to introduce a number of business practice changes, including adjusting workers' schedules to support their enrollment in Airport University, providing tuition assistance for course enrollment, considering how certifications earned translate to employment advancement, and adapting hiring practices to make jobs more accessible for local residents — especially those who do not speak English as a first language. Port Jobs publicly communicates about this work and provides concrete examples of successful partnerships with employers. In doing so, Port Jobs is demonstrating how employers can play a vital role in efforts to hire and advance young workers who reside in the diverse communities surrounding the airport. Port Jobs is also raising awareness among employers about critical supports that promote worker success and workforce stability. For example, Port Jobs has publicly highlighted its partnership with Delta Airlines around aviation maintenance occupations. The publicity serves as a call to action for more airport employers to leverage and invest in Port Jobs resources as well as to hire and support career advancement for young adults in the aviation field.

Using Public Wage Subsidies

“We are clear with employers that they aren’t hiring our young adults for free labor” — Employment Specialist at Towards Employment, Cleveland, OH

Public wage subsidies, such as WIOA funding for summer employment or work-based learning programs, are commonly utilized to support young adults’ connections to work. Wage subsidies can help incentivize employers to hire young adults and can also be a helpful lever to negotiate expectations about workplace practices and worker experience. For example, practitioners can engage with employers to make the following types of arrangements for subsidized work experiences:

- Worksite agreements that outline expectations for work experiences and performance feedback
- Designation of a site supervisor who is responsible for structuring work responsibilities and offering guidance and feedback
- Designation of workplace mentor who will coach and support young adult workers
- Agreements to meet and communicate with workforce provider staff to discuss young adults’ job performance, etc.
- Workforce provider-led orientation and other trainings for supervisors and mentors around practices to support young adults in the workplace

Through this type of engagement, workforce practitioners are vetting the degree to which employers are committed to supporting good fit jobs for young adults. This can also help set the stage for important conversations about an employer’s role in providing jobs that are emotionally safe and inclusive – including pairing young adults with workplace mentors and supervisors who are close in age, have similar lived experiences, backgrounds, etc. The engagement can also help employers understand how they may need to examine their workplace practices such as scheduling, training, and approaches to providing feedback about performance – and how all workers, not just young adults, can benefit from business practice changes. For additional information about Generation Work local partners’ use of public wage subsidies please see [“Now Jobs” in Young Adult Workforce Programming](#).

Spotlight on Generation Work Partner

Towards Employment — a workforce development organization — and Youth Opportunities Unlimited — a youth development organization — in 2019 were jointly providing workforce programming at the Young Adult Resource Center (YRC), a youth-focused center based in an American Job Center in downtown Cleveland, Ohio. YRC staff use public wage subsidies connect young adults to four- to six-week subsidized jobs. For these job opportunities, YRC staff focus on engaging employers that are willing to communicate regularly and provide feedback to YRC coaches about the young adults' work experiences. They seek employers that are committed to providing learning opportunities and to offering guidance about workplace expectations and norms. In addition, YRC career coaches seek out work experiences that have the potential to lead to regular, paid employment.

A young adult who participated in this subsidized employment program described how his experience with the YRC helped him decide to pursue a career in the health care field. His coach connected him to a job at a local senior citizen rehabilitation center. His employment status was later converted to unsubsidized, and he was promoted into an activities coordinator position. In describing his experience at the facility, the young man noted that he had the opportunity to work in different areas, such as activities planning and the medical records department, and that his supervisor mentored him about different occupations in the health care field. The young man also noted that, on his behalf, his YRC career coach spoke with his supervisor about his interest in enrolling in a postsecondary training program and about the time commitment required to be successful. His supervisor adjusted his work schedule to accommodate this training.

Leveraging Interest in Addressing Racial Inequities in Employment and Providing Resources

“During a conversation, an employer said to me, ‘Race isn’t an issue for us. We hire the best and most qualified candidates.’ Our ability to turn to disaggregated employment data in that moment helped us shift the direction of the conversation with [the employer].” – Generation Work Project Manager, Cleveland, OH

We are in a moment where employers are increasingly understanding that their previous diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts fall short. And, that more needs to be done to make meaningful progress and lasting change for the economic stability and mobility for workers of color. There are opportunities for workforce practitioners to leverage this interest and commitments among the business community, and to lend practitioner expertise in ways to support and advance equity and inclusion in the workplace. This includes providing training and other resources to help companies integrate restorative, trauma-informed, and healing-centered practices into their companies. Incorporating these approaches not only facilitates success for young workers of color, but also contributes value to the workforce writ large.

Practitioners have also found value in using disaggregated data to guide conversations with employer representatives on race and ethnicity. Data provides a powerful, and at times irrefutable, basis to guide conversations about sensitive topics such as discriminatory hiring practices, occupational segregation, and power dynamics in the workplace. Using data to inform these discussions can help improve awareness and buy-in among a broader set of representatives at a firm to work with practitioners and address racial inequities in the workplace. These conversations also offer an opportunity to reframe employment of young adults in terms of the assets they bring to the workplace while also describing the types of supports and structures that are necessary to succeed at work. Such conversations can also open the door to opportunities for workforce providers to work directly with employers and help shape good fit job opportunities.

Spotlight on Generation Work Partner

In 2018, Generation Work partners in Philadelphia hosted a Race, Equity, and Employment training for local service sector employers. A leader from Hopeworks, a community-based organization based in Camden, NJ, collaboratively planned with local partners and facilitated the two-day training session. The objective for the training was to help improve employers' awareness of and utilization of trauma-informed and healing-centered management practices. Topics included:

- Local data that describes racial disparities in employment for people of color, and specifically for occupations in the service sector
- Training around the science of trauma and stress on the brain, and the historic and current racial disparities related to those effects
- A panel discussion with young adults who shared their perspectives and experiences with employment in the service sector

Participants of the training reported positive feedback, noting:

- *"I have brought training topics back to my team. We've integrated topics to the trainings we host [internally]. These approaches will support efforts to improve retention and satisfaction of current employees."*
- *"[I've learned] the power of language is so important in effectively communicating with staff. For example, when there is an issue, instead of asking 'what's wrong with you?' we need to be asking 'what happened and how can we fix things?' This will result in a more fruitful conversation."*

Walking Away from an Employer

“We’ve learned that we should be absolutely unapologetic about the employer partners we accept. For a long time, we were happy to have any employer partner with us. That is no longer the case. Employers need to be willing to work with us and understand our young adults’ assets and needs.” – YouthBuild Philadelphia Director

Workforce practitioners have an incredible responsibility to prioritize employer partnerships with businesses that offer good fit job opportunities for young adults. Jobs that are a good fit not only have workplace and scheduling practices that support young people’s success, but also equitable, emotionally safe, and inclusive work environments. As practitioners engage with employers to identify and try to cultivate good fit employment opportunities, they learn a lot about a company’s employment practices and how employees are supported at work. If through this engagement they learn about hostile work environments or employers who aren’t interested in positive workplace practices and culture, then walking away from

an employer relationship may be the right thing to do. We’ve seen how walking away can open new opportunities to influence employer practice change. In Philadelphia, partners involved in Generation Work share information about negative employment experiences with other local workforce providers to prevent other young adults from having these experiences. This collective response and negative reputation in the community can influence employers to take stock of their employment practices. There is potential for employers to re-engage with the practitioner community when they demonstrate willingness to and steps toward making changes that support worker wellbeing and success.

Spotlight on Generation Work Partner

Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana walked away from an employer partnership that wasn’t a good fit for the program’s young adult participants. Walking away influenced a manufacturer to improve practices so they offered its workers greater job stability, improved pay, and training.

A director from Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana described this experience, *“The employer was interested in hiring our participants...Through conversations, we recognized that they were paying a minimum wage, they were not invested in training and developing their employees, and not doing anything to support retention. The employer was burning through workers and temp agencies. We recommended some training programs, and we recommended a wage increase. The employer wasn’t interested in doing any of it. So, we walked away. The employer came back eight or nine months later. They had made a pay increase and were interested in investing in training. They were also working to end reliance on a temporary workforce and had started transitioning to a part-time and full-time workforce. Because of this, we were willing to re-engage with them.”*

Cultivating Connections Between Employers and Young Adults

“We are changing the narrative of what a drop-out is, including a commitment to not call young people drop-outs. Employers meet our students and think [they] do not look like a drop-out, they don’t look like someone who can’t perform or work with other people.” — YouthBuild Philadelphia



One approach to cultivating good fit jobs for young adults is to provide opportunities for employers and young adults to connect with one another. Meeting with young adults can help employers develop a better understanding of their assets, motivations, and experiences. This engagement can help shift mindsets and preconceived biases around hiring young people, particularly young people of color. These connections can also directly influence how employers recruit, retain, and advance young workers.

We’ve identified two practices that workforce practitioners can use to help cultivate connections between employers and young adults.

- Hosting opportunities for employers to engage with young adults at their program location
- Including young adults in employer meetings to foster mutual understanding

Hosting Opportunities for Employers to Engage with Young Adults at Workforce Program Locations

“During the visits, what we’re presenting to employers is our idea of climate and culture. They see the way a staff member and student interact and think that is the kind of relationship supervisors and employees should have.” – Director of Climate and Culture at YouthBuild Philadelphia

Inviting employers to visit workforce programs can help them develop a more grounded understanding of the education, training, and support services provided to young adults — and how students are equipped to enter the workforce upon program completion. The visits can also offer organic ways for employers to personally experience the climate and culture workforce organizations foster. Employers can observe how staff and young adult participants interact with one another and gain a better understanding of how they can better support relationship-building, mentorship, and positive communication practices in the workplace.

Workforce practitioners that have used this approach to employer engagement noted the following benefits, including:

- Employer mindset shifts around hiring young adults, especially for young adults of color or young adults who haven’t followed a conventional trajectory in education and work
- Employer reflection on ways they can diversify their workforce and promote an inclusive workplace culture
- Employer reflection about ways they can better recruit, retain, and advance young workers
- Employer interest in deepening partnership with workforce organizations

Spotlight on Generation Work Partner

Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana invites employer prospects to attend monthly Community Leader Tours at its program location. During the tours, employers have an opportunity to engage with program staff, develop a better understanding of the range of education and training programs offered, and interact with program participants. Employers also have an opportunity to visit Goodwill’s Commercial Services, a social enterprise operation that provides contract manufacturing, assembly, and packaging services. The majority of employees at the Commercial Services site (about 85%) have experienced a barrier to employment, such as a documented disability, past involvement with the criminal justice system, or lack a high school diploma. Program leaders shared that employer interactions with employees working at the Commercial Services location has been an effective way to shift mindsets around hiring a new population of workers. It has also opened the door to Goodwill forging new and deeper partnerships with employers. Goodwill Indy leaders have observed employers shifting from having an altruistic mindset of working with them to seeing the business value of working with Goodwill Indy to build a diverse and inclusive workforce.

Including Young Adults in Employer Meetings to Foster Mutual Understanding

“You could see the conversation shift among employers. It was less like ‘here’s the job and we are hiring.’ But more about fit. The employers were listening and reflecting, ‘What do you [the young adult] want? What do we [the employer] want? Is this a good fit?’” – Program Director from 1199c Training and Upgrading Fund reflecting on a meeting between pre-apprentices and apprenticeship employers

Involving young adults in discussions with employers can be a powerful tactic for cultivating good fit job opportunities. Young adults can represent their interests, share valuable perspectives and insights, help employers better understand the challenges young workers may experience, and help employers design solutions that meet young adults’ and their business’ needs. At the same time, young adults gain a better understanding of employers, potential job opportunities, and workplace culture. Overall, these types of conversations can foster opportunities for both young adults and employers to learn more about each other and shift mindsets and preconceived biases held by both parties. Additionally, meetings can help employers reflect on their workers’ personal situations – e.g., commute time and schedules for taking children to daycare, school, etc. – and how they can implement practices that are more supportive of worker stability and success.

Fostering this type of participatory engagement requires careful planning, especially to help avoid potential landmines such as situations that may result in tokenization of young adults or power imbalances between older and younger adults. Workforce practitioners engage in work to not only help facilitate conversations but to also ensure that both employer representatives and young adults are appropriately prepared for engagement.

Generation Work partners have used the following approaches to cultivate productive engagement between young adults and employers:

- Hiring a consultant or working with existing young adult networks (e.g., peer navigators with Seattle’s [Reconnect to Opportunity](#)) to conduct interviews² with young adults. Interviews inform understanding of young adults’ employment experiences and glean insights into how workplace culture and practices could be improved. Information from interviews is synthesized in reports and presentations that are shared in advance with employer partners. The reports also help frame panel discussions arranged and facilitated by workforce organizations.
- Organizing meetings and networking sessions where employers have an opportunity to talk with young adults who are participating in a workforce training program. During these types of meetings, employers gain a better understanding of the skills students are building as well as the assets they can offer in the workplace. Students have an opportunity to ask questions about the types of jobs available, what the work entails, schedules, workplace culture, etc. Workforce practitioners conduct advance work to prepare for these meetings – including communicating with employers about the importance of having a representative who participants can identify with. This could include someone closer in age to the young adult participants, of a similar gender or racial identity, or who may also have followed a nontraditional education and career path.

² Young adults were compensated for their participation in interviews and received references to be included in their resumes.

Working with Employers to Change Practices from the Inside

“Whenever possible we try to influence business practices from the inside...We use a restorative lens when there’s a problem in the workplace. Business contacts share their experience, and we [help] share the experience of the young worker. Then we talk about the best way to move forward together.” — YouthBuild Philadelphia



Workforce practitioners can work directly with employers to encourage and influence workplace practice changes – including how young adults are onboarded, trained, mentored, and supervised at work. We’ve identified three practices that workforce practitioners can adopt to directly work with employers to change business practices.

- Providing feedback and coaching to supervisors as part of participant retention services, post-hire
- Gathering and relaying worker feedback to supervisors and managers
- Providing technical assistance to supervisors of frontline employees

Through this engagement, providers can gain an understanding of employer practices, especially how employees are supported at work. This type of knowledge serves as the basis for workforce providers to suggest changes that would be beneficial to employees and the business. And it offers opportunities for workforce providers to demonstrate their value to employers. A key aspect of this value is that workforce providers know the skills, aptitudes, goals, and motivations of their participants — and they understand the types of challenges that keep young workers from successfully transitioning from unemployment to work and retaining employment.

Providing Feedback and Coaching to Supervisors as Part of Participant Retention Services, Post-Hire

“Providing retention support has offered an inside-out view of what is happening in a job...We are better prepared to have conversations with employers about the fact that their [high] turnover isn’t because their pay is 25 cents less than the competition. But there are other things in the workplace that need to be improved – communication, supervision, schedules – etc.” – Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana

Employment retention services for newly placed workers are commonly offered by young adult workforce providers. Program staff check in with participants and supervisors to monitor how participants are faring on the job. As part of these check-ins, providers can help young adults problem-solve and coach them to self-advocate if they’re experiencing workplace issues. But providers also recognize that not all problems should be the workers’ burden. As an

outside entity dedicated to supporting young adult workers, they have a unique and important role to play in engaging with employers around workplace practices. Examples of this engagement include providing coaching directly to workplace supervisors on the importance of providing regular feedback, how to clearly communicate workplace policies and practices, and strategies to foster positive and supportive workplaces.

Spotlight on Generation Work Partner

YouthBuild Philadelphia staff draw on feedback from students and in-person employment site visits to offer ongoing coaching and input to employer staff contacts. The coaching and feedback are opportunities to address workplace challenges in ways that acknowledge the perspectives of both the employers and YouthBuild Philly students. It is also a venue for YouthBuild Philly staff to encourage frontline management practices that foster supportive workplace culture, including encouraging frontline managers to understand young workers’ lives outside of work.

A YouthBuild Philly Director offered the following example from her work: “We had a situation where a young person was doing the task that was asked, but he wasn’t smiling and so was graded and critiqued very hard by his manager. I explained to his manager that he lives in a community in Philly where you don’t just smile as you’re walking down the street. The manager wasn’t aware because this wasn’t the experience in his community. He was then better prepared to give the direct feedback and coaching to the young worker that ‘Hey, you’re customer-facing. What does it look like to greet somebody in a friendly way with a smile? You should do that more.’”

Gathering and Relaying Worker Feedback to Supervisors and Managers

“There were worker concerns raised in the survey about satisfaction and communication issues. Employers were also pleasantly surprised to learn that their workers wanted to know the big picture of the company and business as well as how they [workers] fit within it.” – Workforce Solutions of Metro Hartford

Workforce service providers can provide a valuable service to employers by gathering and relaying frontline worker feedback. [Research shows](#) that when employers solicit feedback from frontline workers – and managers are responsive to that feedback – employers see increased employee engagement, a significant reduction in turnover, and resulting cost savings. Other [research](#) indicates that the majority of workers want and expect to provide input to improve the business process and product as well as their own job. Employees that are more engaged tend to be more loyal to the company and can grow into leadership roles.

Through this engagement, workforce service providers can provide an outside ear and perspective to employers. Providers can offer candid feedback the employer might not otherwise have access to. Additionally, the feedback can be used to identify business practice changes to address issues and improve worker experience. In some cases, these follow-up activities may result in further engagement with the workforce provider, including working with companies to foster more inclusive and equitable work environments.

Spotlight on Generation Work Partner

In 2018, Workforce Solutions of Metro Hartford launched a pilot project to advance job quality strategies with three manufacturers. To support this customized work, Workforce Solutions administered a survey to frontline workers to better understand their perspectives and experiences at work. The survey results indicated that there was low cultural competency, especially with regard to communication and supervision, among managers supervising young workers of color. The results from the survey helped inform next steps for work with these employers – which included trainings on mentoring, racial equity and inclusion, and management best practices. The employers also made workforce practice changes, such as instituting monthly staff meetings, refining their onboarding system to better support frontline workers, and revising job descriptions. Initial results of a 6-month follow-up survey at one of the manufacturing firms showed that employee satisfaction increased from 30% to 69%.

Providing Technical Assistance to Supervisors of Frontline Employees

“I make sure that supervisors [of our program participants] understand that EVERYONE has a Day One. If you support them right, then they [young participants] will give you what you need.” – Career Coach at Our Piece of Pie in Hartford, CT describing orientation sessions to site supervisors for WBL programs.

“There’s a cultural shift around how supervision happens. You see the lightbulb go off around understanding what a quality workplace looks like and how that impacts patient care and employee turnover.” – Training Fund Director describing impact of training session for new supervisors of young workers

Often, a good employment experience for a young adult rests on supervisors who can mentor, provide constructive and supportive feedback, and offer guidance for performing job duties. This type of experience can be challenging when the supervisors may lack experience, training in positive supervisory practices, or support from their own managers. And, building on their own experiences working with young adults, this is an area where workforce practitioners can offer valuable assistance to employers.

Technical assistance offerings can include:

- Orientation sessions to support the process for onboarding new employees
- Tools to guide performance feedback conversations
- Trainings related to youth development practices, such as trauma-informed management and managing with empathy

Generation Work partners shared that at times they’ve “packaged” technical assistance as part of their work with employers to design and support

work-based learning opportunities. For example, practitioners can leverage existing frameworks developed for work-based learning programs, including tools that describe the types of competencies – technical and interpersonal skills – that participants are expected to gain at work. These tools can provide a foundation for helping supervisors consider ways to provide job instructions and to ground feedback about work performance.

Another way to provide technical assistance is to present a business case for supportive supervisory practices. Supervisors often dictate what frontline workers experience at work, including whether workers feel safe, supported, and included. Not having appropriate supports in place can contribute to employee turnover and issues with workplace culture. Workforce practitioners have a keen understanding of ways to effectively support and communicate with young adults and can leverage this experience in their work with employers. Technical assistance could include providing training to supervisors in areas related to communication and supporting teamwork and problem-solving skills.

Spotlight on Generation Work Partner

YouthBuild Philadelphia has provided training to frontline supervisors at a grocery retailer, a coffee shop and a clothing retailer. Technical assistance was offered in topics related to how to support young workers, demonstrate empathy in supervision, and provide timely and ongoing feedback. Participating employers made changes to employment practices, including adjusting labor hours and hiring so that cashiers can get the hours they want, lengthening shifts, instituting regular check-ins with frontline workers, and incorporating techniques for empathic leadership.

An employer representative of the grocery retailer described her experience working with YouthBuild Philly as, “Our partnership with YouthBuild has helped us deepen our understanding of where our associates are coming from in order to support them. If home life isn’t right, it bleeds into work life. We have to understand our associates in order to retain them.”



aspeninstitute.org/eop

 [@AspenWorkforce](https://twitter.com/AspenWorkforce)

 fb.me/AspenEOP

 linkedin.com/company/AspenEOP