

# Promising Practices for Incorporating Positive Youth Development Into Young Adult Workers' Professional Development

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## Introduction

The demographics of the U.S. workforce are changing in ways that are hard to ignore. Large numbers of baby boomers are retiring and the young adults who are entering the labor force are more racially and ethnically diverse than at any other point in American history.<sup>1</sup> Against this backdrop, there is a common challenge for employers who want to hire and retain young adult talent and for workforce development practitioners: how to set young workers up for success, particularly young workers of color who have been systematically excluded from opportunities to prepare for, access, and advance in the workforce.

One emerging strategy is to incorporate positive youth development approaches into the workplace to better support and engage young adult workers (i.e., those ages 18 to 29). Positive youth development has long been used in social service programs that serve adolescents and young adults. However, the workplace is a very different setting, with different constraints and expectations for young people; therefore, there is a need to better understand what it would mean for employers to implement positive youth development practices. Given that workforce development organizations understand both young jobseekers' and employers' needs, they play an important role in engaging employers in conversations about practices that support positive youth development and in helping them foster environments that encourage development for all employees, including young employees.

### Promising Practices

Through interviews with employers and workforce development practitioners, and focus groups with young adults, we identified four professional development practices being used by employers that are well-aligned with, and incorporate, positive youth development approaches. These are practices that workforce development practitioners can lift up in their engagement with employers, to support and encourage them to:

- **Create a structured, supportive, and safe environment where young adults can ask questions and take responsibility for their training and work.**
- **Work together with young adults to set and work toward goals to achieve success in the workplace.**
- **Provide young adults with internal and external training opportunities.**
- **Have clearly articulated pathways and processes for promotion.**

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<sup>1</sup> For example, 47 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds are people of color, compared with 39 percent of 25- to 64-year-olds (data on the working-age population by race/ethnicity from 2016-2020 come from PolicyLink/USC Equity Research Institute, National Equity Atlas, [nationalequityatlas.org](http://nationalequityatlas.org)). Future young workers are likely to be even more diverse, as Generation Z continues to enter the labor force: One estimate is that 50 percent of 7- to 22-year-olds in Gen Z are people of color, compared with 39 percent of millennials at the same ages and approximately 30 percent of Gen X at the same ages (data from Parker, K. & Igielnik, R. (2020). *On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What we Know About Gen Z So Far*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>).

This case study is one in a series of three written to give workforce development practitioners an understanding of specific *supervision*, *professional development*, and *worker voice* practices that are currently being implemented by employers that align with positive youth development practices. This particular resource focuses on *professional development* practices that can promote skill building, help young adults of diverse backgrounds learn and grow, and empower all young adults to thrive at work.

## Integrating positive youth development into the workplace

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Young adults need a diverse set of hard and soft skills to do their jobs well, feel confident in their performance, and grow in their careers. At the same time, young adults may need support in developing such skills, including setting goals and identifying opportunities for training and professional development that align with their goals. However, implementation of these practices is not always easy. In addition to promising professional development practices, this case study highlights some of the challenges and potential pitfalls employers may experience in the process of implementing such practices, which workforce development practitioners can help employers anticipate.



The practices and challenges here were identified through interviews with employers and staff from workforce development organizations, and via focus groups with young adult workers in Chicago, IL and Birmingham, AL, where local partnerships are engaged in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Generation Work™ initiative (see more about Generation Work in the callout box).

From their case management and coaching relationships with young adults, workforce development practitioners have a unique understanding of the knowledge, skills, and experiences that these workers can contribute to projects, as well as what additional training opportunities they may need. This gives them a specific expert lens from which to start employer conversations about professional development, while drawing on the promising practices described in this case study. For example, practitioners can ask thoughtful questions about these kinds of practices during conversations with new or established employer partners to help shift their thinking. Workforce development practitioners can help employers understand the benefits that come from investing in staff professional development via an increasingly well-trained and motivated workforce that includes young adult workers who feel valued by their company. Practitioners may be able to identify employers using these (or similar) practices as they seek potential partner companies that are likely to support professional development opportunities for young adults. And workforce development practitioners who partner with employers to improve how companies engage with young people can use these practices as examples of how to provide young adults with upskilling and learning opportunities that align with evidence-based positive youth development principles.

Additionally, workforce development professionals can collaborate with employers to help them design and implement training opportunities that address both employers' and young adult workers' specific needs. This might include facilitating partnerships between employers and other organizations that can provide training, such as local nonprofits and educational institutions, to ensure that young adult workers have access to appropriate and high-quality training opportunities. And workforce development practitioners who have a role in preparing young adults for work can provide them with structured and scaffolded support to identify and participate in training and development opportunities. This might include helping young adults articulate goals and develop plans for accomplishing their goals, and encouraging them to seek out training opportunities that are suggested or offered by their employers.

## Generation Work™ and the Principles of Positive Youth Development

The Annie E. Casey Foundation launched Generation Work in 2016 to connect more of America's young adults—especially young people of color from low-income families—with meaningful employment by changing the ways in which public and private systems prepare them for and support them in jobs. Now in its second phase, Generation Work partners across the country are engaging with employers to expand their understanding of their role in supporting young adults' employment stability and career advancement. Child Trends has served as a national partner since Generation Work began and focuses on helping local partnerships integrate positive youth development approaches into their programming and their employer engagement efforts.

Positive youth development is an intentional, prosocial approach that focuses on young people's strengths and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities for growth and learning, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths. In the workplace, young adults need structured and supportive opportunities to develop and expand their skills within a trustworthy and safe environment where they are encouraged to give input and share their ideas, opinions, and perspectives.

## Promising Practices to Support Young Adult Professional Development

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Employers we interviewed want to invest in and promote their staff, and they approach professional development to make that possible in many ways. The young adults we spoke with were motivated by the professional development and skill-building opportunities that their companies offered and wanted to be able to see a career pathway within their company. By investing in their employees' growth and skill development, employers not only demonstrate their commitment to their staff and their staff's success, but can also cultivate a culture of learning and improvement within their company. Below, we describe specific practices that workforce development practitioners can implement with employers to advance positive youth development principles in the professional development of young adults.

## ► Encourage employers to create a structured, supportive, and safe environment where young adults can ask questions and take responsibility for their training and work.

Creating a workplace with clear channels for young adults to ask questions without fear of judgement or retaliation is important in achieving a workplace in which young adults feel a sense of belonging and commitment. When young adults feel that they belong within and are committed to the company, they may be more motivated to invest in and take responsibility for their own growth and the company's success.

- **Companies structure teams to provide scaffolding to early career workers.** A couple companies we spoke with intentionally structure teams so that young adult workers can execute their work independently, but within a supportive environment that offers many people to approach with questions and work through challenges. They do this by having young adults start working on a substantive task soon after starting at the company—working on a small team, led by a manager who verbally communicates and models their availability for support and questions big and small.
- **Companies provide young adults with clear guidance and policies for input and questions.** Workforce development professionals recommended that employers develop clear policies that encourage open communication between young adult workers and managers. This could include promoting regular feedback sessions and creating a safe space where young adults' questions are welcomed and respected. Workforce development professionals also mentioned that it's helpful for employers to develop mentorship or coaching opportunities, and recommended that employers use these mentorship opportunities to match young adults with more experienced employees who can answer questions and provide guidance and support.
- **Managers encourage teams not to view learning opportunities as failures.** One company called this approach "win or learn." In this approach, when a young adult worker tries something that doesn't work the first time or doesn't go as planned, the company focuses on the learning opportunity rather than labeling it as a failure. This approach allows young adults to use what they've learned to guide what they do in the future. In these teams, managers and team leads are coached to allow early career workers to try things and figure them out. When possible, young adults are allowed to try things for themselves, even if that means that tasks take longer or that young adults try things that aren't ultimately successful. These companies believe that the best way for young adults to learn is by doing.

*"One of the questions we ask is, what does winning look like for everyone? Is there a chance to learn here? Because remember, it's not win or lose, it's win or learn. What can we learn from this?"*

**-Employer interviewee**

▶ **Key challenges:** One challenge we heard from employers is that it can be difficult for seasoned staff to sit back and watch young adults try to figure out tasks themselves, knowing that they, as managers, could step in and provide them with a faster solution. Not all companies may be able to take this approach, which can add time to project and production schedules. However, some employers have found this short-term investment to be worth it in the long-term: One employer stated that the process of allowing young adults to work through problems on their own set them up with the knowledge and skills to work through future issues more easily.

*“Sometimes it is really frustrating for me ... you could just tell them what to do and we could save four weeks, but we’ve got to get this person there. They have to start seeing it the way we see it.”*

**-Employer interviewee**

## ▶ Encourage employers to have managers and young adults work together to set and work toward goals to achieve success in the workplace.

Managers are the direct connection between a company’s goals and those of a young adult, and are key in ensuring alignment and supporting achievement.

- **Managers are intentional about talking with young adults about their goals.** Almost all of the companies we spoke with have a way of providing young adults with opportunities for setting professional—and, in many cases, personal—goals. All young adults that we spoke with stated that they do want their supervisor to support them in setting goals, although few had received this kind of support consistently from their managers. Managers provide goal-setting support to young adults through intentional practices such as meeting regularly to set goals, developing individualized plans on how to achieve the goals, and following up with the young adults to ensure they’re on track to accomplish the goals.
- **Managers meet with young adults throughout the year to help them work toward their goals.** Goal setting is most effective when it involves ongoing discussions rather than a one-time conversation. Young adults require continuous support throughout the year to achieve their goals. Workforce development practitioners cautioned that young adults need help working toward goals. For example, some companies offer self-guided skills and careers tests, which require young adults to identify what assessments are most aligned with their goals and to complete them on their own time. To be more effective, supervisors can purposefully facilitate structured, intentional goal-setting conversations during which the supervisor and the young adult discuss what the young adult wants to achieve; then, together, develop a plan for how the supervisor can help the young adult accomplish those goals (for example, by pointing young adults to existing resources and aligning goals with available professional development opportunities). While we heard varied responses from companies on the cadence of these check-ins and goal-setting meetings, these meetings also provided a way for young adults to stay on track for accomplishing their goals and managers to make themselves available to answer questions that young adults may have throughout the year.

## ► Encourage employers to provide young adults with internal and external training opportunities.

Young adults need opportunities to learn and grow and to develop their skills in a way that prepares them to do their job, grow in ways that are valuable to them, and prepare them for greater responsibilities within the company.

- **Companies provide young adults with internal training opportunities.** Employers and young adults we talked with described ways staff are provided with internal training opportunities. Employers mentioned providing young adults with on-the-job training opportunities and workshops and facilitating opportunities for supervisors and team members to train young adults. One manufacturing company has an on-the-job training program that allows staff to select other departments within the company where they can work alongside other teams to learn more about those teams' projects. Young adults echoed these practices by describing how their companies have internal training programs that help staff build skills through on-the-job training and learning through experience. One young adult also stated that their employer looks for training opportunities on projects that allow them to gain additional learnings specific to those projects.

**Companies provide young adults with external training opportunities.** When it comes to external training opportunities, one manufacturing company described sending staff out to receive training on specific machinery and providing tuition reimbursement for training that is not offered in-house. Other companies talked about providing young adults with tuition assistance and partnering with other local community organizations, schools, and colleges that provide training; this allows staff members to gain additional external training opportunities to develop and build skills to continue growing within the company. One small tech company described accomplishing this by offering staff members project management training opportunities through one of their other organizations.

- **Key challenges:** One challenge that all companies must be cognizant of, is ensuring that all young adults—regardless of their background or racial or ethnic identity—can access internal and external training. Based on the experiences of the young adults they support, the workforce development practitioners we spoke with feel that many companies still struggle with systemic biases. Some of their young adults have been held back or overlooked for skill-building opportunities within their companies due to gender, race, and sexual orientation. Workforce development professionals can play the important role of helping employers identify and address these biases to foster an inclusive environment where all employees, regardless of background, have equal opportunities to grow and contribute to the company's success.

## ► Encourage employers to have clearly articulated pathways and processes for promotion.

Companies have transparent and well-defined written guidelines that young adults can leverage to advance their careers within the company. This clarity fosters trust and motivation among young adults, empowering them to actively pursue opportunities for growth and development.

- **Managers work with young adults to prepare a plan for advancement.** Young adults we spoke with discussed the importance of having a clear process and support from their supervisor when going up for promotion; however, not all of them felt that they have support from their supervisors and managers. One practice we heard was from a manufacturing company that developed a written, formalized promotion process. This company worked with a nonprofit organization to help them become more equitable; one key recommendation from this organization was the need for the company to have a

clear and transparent process for promotion. They worked with the company to create a promotion process that starts by having young adults complete a promotion plan form—which both HR and their supervisor also complete—to provide the young adult with a structured and written promotion plan prior to young adults going up for promotion. This plan lays out a clear path for what the young adult must do to get promoted, which can be extremely beneficial to young adults who want a promotion but know they are not yet ready. For those who think they're ready and don't get promoted, this written plan lays out clear steps to prepare that young adult.

- ▶ **Key challenges:** Young people of color may not always see a pathway to promotion when there are not people of color in management or leadership positions. These young people must see that career pathways and promotion opportunities really are for everyone, not just for some people. Workforce development practitioners can work with employers to convey the importance of diversifying company leadership and can emphasize that, when companies have supervisors and leaders of color, young people of color can more easily see their own trajectories within that company.

## Putting Positive Youth Development in Action

As employers look for ways to attract and retain young adult talent, workforce development practitioners can offer positive youth development approaches as a promising way forward.<sup>2</sup> While our case study explored promising practices and more research is needed on outcomes, it is reasonable to assume that young adult workers will be more likely to feel supported when companies focus on their strengths, create trustworthy and safe settings, and provide them with opportunities to learn.<sup>3,4,5</sup> Many of these support systems can be formalized through professional development practices and processes, including goal setting, setting the expectation of a learning culture, and internal and external training.



**Workforce development organizations play an important role in engaging employers in conversations about these practices and helping them design and implement professional development initiatives.** A critical first step is to encourage employers looking to implement new practices and policies around professional development to start by seeking to understand the perspectives of young adult workers at their companies. Although the promising approaches described in this case study are aligned with positive youth development principles, every company has a unique context and a unique talent pool. Employers can gain

<sup>2</sup> See this blog post for other examples of positive youth development in the workplace, and the business case for positive youth development: Strong, T. & Sacks, V. (2024). *How positive youth development approaches can inform your business choices*. The National Fund for Workforce Solutions. <https://nationalfund.org/how-positive-youth-development-approaches-can-inform-your-business-choices/>

<sup>3</sup> Arnold, M. E., & Gagnon, R. J. (2019). Illuminating the process of youth development: The mediating effect of thriving on youth development outcomes. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, 7(3), 24-51. <https://doi.org/10.54718/GHUP2927>

<sup>4</sup> Burkhard, B. M., Robinson, K. M., Murray, E. D., & Lerner, R. M. (2020). Positive youth development: Theory and perspective. In *The encyclopedia of child and adolescent development* (pp. 1–12). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171492.wecad310>

<sup>5</sup> Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A. M., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). Positive Youth Development in the United States: Research Findings on Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591, 98–124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716203260102>

valuable information for developing a plan (perhaps in partnership with a workforce development organization) to identify and grow internal talent by asking young adult workers how they might best support young adults in setting their goals—and what training opportunities young adults see as valuable to their job.

In Chicago, the Generation Work partnership—the [Corporate Coalition](#), [Cara Plus](#), and [Chicagoland Workforce Funder Alliance](#)—leads cohorts of employers through the development and implementation of pilots to test practices intended to improve work experiences and trajectories for young adult workers, particularly young adults of color. For nine months, the Chicago partners provide companies in each cohort with training on racial equity and inclusion and positive youth development, coaching on implementation, and peer learning opportunities. The Birmingham local partnership, led by [Central Six Alabama Works!](#) and [TechBirmingham](#), manages the Birmingham Tech Council, made up of representatives from local tech companies and young adults who work at tech companies in the city. The Council meets monthly to discuss challenges and opportunities related to recruiting and retaining diverse talent, and finding sustainable employment opportunities, in Birmingham’s growing tech industry. Bringing employers into direct conversation with young adult workers, as peers, enables dialogue that might not otherwise happen within a company. It also offers young adult participants a forum to voice their experiences and ideas. The Council recently fielded a young tech talent survey to explore and highlight opportunities for improvement in local employer practices. These are just two examples of how Generation Work partnerships are engaging employers to make work better for all young adults by utilizing strategies like positive youth development.

## Methods Note

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In Birmingham, Child Trends interviewed 10 personnel across four companies, including one small and one mid-size technology company, a large financial services company, and a delivery services company; an in-person group interview with three staff members from the local Generation Work partnership; and an in-person focus group with three young adult workers.

In Chicago, Child Trends interviewed five personnel at two companies: a mid-size manufacturing company and a health care company; an in-person group interview with two staff members from the local partnership; two in-person interviews with three workforce development staff (one individual and one group interview); and an in-person focus group with seven young adult workers.

Child Trends cross-walked the practices described in the interviews and focus groups with positive youth development principles to identify promising strategies that workforce development practitioners could encourage employers to apply in their companies.

We do not know for certain whether these practices are *effective* in improving hiring and retention of young talent or young adults’ career trajectories. We did not speak to young adult employees at the same companies we interviewed, and we don’t know how the practices identified by employers were received and experienced by their own employees. However, we spoke with young adults working at other companies about the practices they have found to be either supportive or discouraging, and we compared those experiences with the practices described by companies. Throughout the case study, we have noted where the experiences of young adults offer caution or additional insight into how these practices can be applied.

Future research should explore linkages between positive youth development practices in the workplace and both employer and young adult worker outcomes. For example, exploring whether retention increases—and costs associated with turnover decrease—could be important information for employers. Additionally, a better understanding of whether these practices help young adult workers grow and reach their own individual career goals would be useful for both the field and young adult workers themselves. While studies of this sort would require collecting more detailed quantitative data and following workers from the same companies over time, they could advance our understanding of these practices in important and influential ways.



# Acknowledgements

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Child Trends spoke to 41 people to inform this case study, and we thank them for their willingness to share their experiences and insights, so that we could better understand promising practices for incorporating positive youth development within the workplace. We would also like to thank Hannah Lantos and Jan DeCoursey of Child Trends for their expertise and support throughout this work. This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that 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.

**Suggested citation:** Bradley, M., & Sacks, V. (2024). Promising practices for incorporating positive youth development into young adult workers' professional development. Child Trends.  
DOI: 10.56417/9772u3934h