

Lessons From Generation Work on Centering Young Adult Worker Voice in Employer Engagement

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Introduction

Increasingly, workforce development practitioners seek to elevate the voices of young adult workers as a means to partner with employers on improving workplace practices. Hearing directly from young adults and earlier career workers helps employers better understand and appreciate their needs, motivations, and challenges.

In this brief, we describe potential strategies for centering young adult worker voice in employer engagement efforts, drawing on the experiences of local partnerships in multiple U.S. cities that participated in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Generation Work™ initiative. Generation Work aims to reshape how public and private systems prepare young adults for the workforce. One strategy used by the local partnerships is to engage young adult workers to drive employer engagement around implementing youth-supportive practices in the workplace. Local partnerships are finding that, when executed carefully and with consideration for the benefits to both employers and young adults, these strategies not only improve workplace practices but also strengthen young adults' skills, confidence, and professional networks, creating value for both employees and employers.

The brief begins with background on Generation Work and positive youth development, one of Generation Work's underlying approaches. We then highlight specific approaches that local partners are using to involve young adult workers, provide examples of positive outcomes observed along the way, and conclude with key resources and considerations for effective young adult worker engagement.

Background

About Generation Work

The Annie E. Casey Foundation launched [Generation Work](https://www.aecf.org/resources/generation-work)ⁱ in 2016 and will continue the initiative through 2025 to connect more of America's young adults—especially young people of color from families with low incomes—with meaningful employment by changing the way public and private systems prepare and support them for success in the workforce.

ⁱ See <https://www.aecf.org/resources/generation-work>.

During the initiative's first phase, five local partnerships worked to align 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 their advancement and earning opportunities.

Building upon previous successes and lessons, partnerships (collaboratives of workforce development organizationsⁱⁱ) in eight cities—Birmingham, Chicago, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Louisville, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Wilmington (DE)—are now working with employers to improve hiring, retention, and advancement practices to better support young people of color.

The initiative combines best practices from the adult education and training field—particularly demand-driven workforce development strategies—with positive youth development practices, such as mentoring and work-based learning.

As a national partner, [Child Trends supports the Generation Work](#)ⁱⁱⁱ local partnerships by helping them integrate positive youth development into their work with both young adults and employers (for example, see the callout box on the [PILOT Assessment Tool](#)^{iv}).

About positive youth development

Positive youth development is a purposeful approach that helps youth build skills, form healthy relationships, and make constructive contributions to their communities. It recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youth's strengths while promoting positive outcomes for young people via opportunities, positive relationships, and supports for their leadership strengths.¹ Applying positive youth development principles in the workplace is a growing approach to better support and engage young adult workers. While positive youth development has a strong history in youth-serving social service programs, its application in workplace settings is less well understood. The use of positive youth development in the workplace is shaped by distinct factors not typically present in youth-serving programs, such as employers' interest in attracting and retaining workers, workplace power dynamics, and broader economic conditions like a tight labor market. These differences underscore the need to adapt positive youth development practices to fit the workplace context. Workforce development organizations are uniquely positioned to bridge this gap, drawing on their understanding of both employers' and young adults' needs to guide conversations about workplace practices that foster growth, skill development, and supportive environments for all employees.

The PILOT Assessment Tool

As part of Generation Work, Child Trends developed the PILOT Assessment, which outlines specific practices that can be applied in workforce training settings to implement five key positive youth development strategies.

- Positive relationships
- Increased skills
- Linkages across work, family, and other settings
- Opportunities to contribute and belong
- Trustworthy, safe settings

ⁱⁱ Local partnership grantees were selected to reflect a mix of partnership structures and entry-level labor market conditions for young adults. See <https://www.aecf.org/resources/generation-work> for more information.

ⁱⁱⁱ See <https://www.childtrends.org/project/generation-work>

^{iv} See https://cms.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/PILOTchecklist_ChildTrends_April2018.pdf

Overview

A central focus for many Generation Work local partnerships is to engage young adult workers to influence employers; this, in turn, can lead to improved practices that address business challenges and support young adult workers. These practices may include strengthening supervisor-supervisee relationships, implementing on-the-job training programs, and inviting young worker feedback on company processes.

The local partnerships pursue this via two key approaches (see Figure 1). First, they create opportunities for young adult workers to engage directly with employers to share their experiences and input—for example, through boards and councils or discussion groups and panels. Second, they collect information from young adults—particularly through focus groups, interviews, and surveys—and use these insights to guide employers on potential changes, highlight areas where workplace practices could better support young adult workers, and demonstrate the value of adopting young adult-informed approaches.

Figure 1. Approaches Used by Generation Work Local Partnerships to Engage Young Adult Workers in Efforts to Change Employer Practice

Key Approaches to Engaging Young Adult Workers and Employers



These approaches translate positive youth development principles into action in several ways. First, providing young people with meaningful opportunities to contribute is a central element of positive youth development (see the PILOT Assessment Tool text box). Engaging young adults in identifying workplace challenges and contributing solutions gives them an opportunity to contribute to their community and develop a deeper connection to their workplace. Second, putting youth in a position to speak with employers as experts about their own experiences can strengthen communication and leadership skills. Third, empowering young adult workers to help make decisions—for example, by providing input on what workplace strategies address their needs and helping design youth-focused engagement activities—fosters autonomy and a sense of agency, core principles of positive youth development. Finally, interacting with both the workforce development organizations facilitating the engagement and the employers that participate gives young adult workers an opportunity to form positive relationships with later-career professionals who may serve as mentors and role models.

Additionally, these approaches show employers how to effectively engage young adult workers and the value of inviting (and acting on) young adult worker input. Empowering young adult workers to contribute their perspectives is a positive youth development practice that can help create workplaces in which young adults feel respected, heard, and supported in their growth; this, in turn, can lead to improved organizational outcomes, including better employee engagement and retention.²

Because not all workforce development organizations will be able to take on this work, they should consider their capacity and resources available for different strategies, from lower-commitment feedback opportunities to more long-term and structured advisory roles. However, when implemented thoughtfully, young adult worker engagement can help shift employers toward more supportive, inclusive, and responsive workplaces. In Generation Work, some employers have reported that engaging with young adult workers directly changed their mindset about their own employees' generational differences. For other employers, hearing firsthand about young adults' experiences, aspirations, and challenges has prompted them to reexamine hiring, compensation, and management approaches. At the same time, young adult workers who participate in these activities report increased confidence, stronger communication and leadership skills, and expanded professional networks.

The next two sections describe the key approaches used by the Generation Work local partnerships to center youth voice in their employer engagement efforts. Increasingly, workforce development practitioners seek to elevate the voices of young adult workers as a tool for partnering with employers to improve workplace practices. Hearing directly from young adults helps employers better understand and appreciate the needs, motivations, and challenges of earlier career workers.

Approaches to Centering Young Adult Voice in Employer Engagement

Different levels of engagement allow young adult workers to participate in ways that match their interests, availability, and desired level of responsibility, while also creating multiple ways for employers to hear and respond to young adult workers' perspectives. For example, some young adults contribute by reviewing employer materials or sharing feedback during focus groups and discussions, while others are comfortable taking on more active roles such as planning and executing events. By tailoring engagement in this way, the local partners ensure that young adult workers are able to fully participate in activities and provide valuable insights from their own experiences, while actively contributing to decision-making processes.

Although these approaches can inform workplace policies and foster growth for both employers and young adults, they require careful planning, sufficient time, and resources to carry out effectively.

Approach 1: Create and facilitate opportunities for young adult workers and employers to engage with each other directly.

The first approach that Generation Work local partnerships use to encourage employers to implement workplace practices that foster growth, skill development, and supportive environments is to create intentional opportunities for young adults and employers to engage with each other in direct, meaningful dialogue. The partnerships provide structured settings for young adults—most of whom are either currently employed or have had some prior work experience—and representatives from employers (typically not the young adults' own employers) to exchange perspectives, share experiences, and explore ways to improve workplace practices. The goal of this approach is to build trust, surface new ideas, and encourage workplaces to evolve in ways that better support young adult workers—strategies that help employers address workplace challenges, reduce turnover, enhance productivity, boost morale, and foster a shared sense of purpose.

Councils and advisory boards

One key strategy local partnerships use to put young adults and employers into direct engagement are councils and advisory boards. Through these groups, local partnerships recruit and pay young adult workers to serve on advisory boards, collaborating directly with company representatives, to share insights and recommendations. These advisory boards and councils pursue a variety of workforce and economic development goals, such as building industry-specific talent pipelines, informing employers about supportive workplace practices, empowering young adult workers by giving them an active role in decision making, and increasing mutual understanding between employers and young adult workers. Within these boards and councils, young adults hold power and voice equal to company representatives.

In practice, this strategy takes different forms across the Generation Work local partnerships. In Birmingham, the local partners, Central Six AlabamaWorks and TechBirmingham, have created the Birmingham Tech Council (BTC), which includes a young adult council to ensure that young adult workers have a direct voice in shaping employer practices in the city's tech industry. Through the BTC, young adults working in tech jobs serve as council members alongside employers and training providers, meeting monthly to discuss the challenges and opportunities of attracting and retaining talent to the industry. Young adult workers originally met as part of a separate Young Adult Workforce sub-committee within the BTC, but—recognizing the value of direct dialogue between workers, employers, and training providers—the partnership has now transitioned to whole-council meetings. In addition to these large group sessions, both employers and young adults have their own affinity spaces to support continuous learning. The Employer Community of Practice focuses on incorporating young adult perspectives into onboarding materials to improve retention of young workers of color, while Sync-Up—a group of young adult professionals and local IT leaders who plan events to discuss IT talent needs and workforce partnerships—provides young adults with a safe space for peer connection and learning. These efforts have also led to the creation of TechConnect, a nontraditional networking event spearheaded by the council's young adults with support from employer and training provider partners.

The Chicago local partnership has developed a Young Adult Advisory Board to provide feedback on the content of its employer cohort model. In the cohort model, employers sign up to develop and pilot an inclusive workplace practice focused on their company's young adult workers, with training and technical assistance from the local partnership along the way. The Young Adult Advisory Board reviews all cohort training materials, with a particular eye toward ensuring that the guidance and examples of positive workplace practices—and on how to implement practice change—reflect young adults' experiences with recruitment, hiring, and retention practices. Board members meet monthly to share their career experiences, discuss workplace challenges, and plan activities for other young adults. For example, Young Adult Advisory Board members helped redesign a Chicago-area networking event to make it more inviting—selecting a more accessible space and creating a formal atmosphere that encouraged authentic connections between young adults and employers. Acting as subject matter experts, young adults share insights that help employers understand the impact of their hiring, retention, and workplace culture strategies. The board members receive stipends and opportunities to expand their professional and social networks, including mentorship from local partnership staff.

Youth Council and Advisory Board Successes

- Conversations with young adults spark “aha moments” for employers, leading to mindset shifts and changes to workplace practices.
- Local partnership staff have observed employers change their perspective to see generational differences as “assets rather than shortcomings.”
- Employers say that conversations with young adults on panels and boards lead to deeper conversations with other employers.

In Cleveland, Towards Employment established the World of Work Council earlier this year to advise their Employer Advisory Board on workplace practices that young adults have identified as important, ensuring that young adult workers' perspectives shape local employment strategies. The newly established Council meets monthly to establish its priorities and messaging and has held its first quarterly meeting with the Employer Advisory Board. In these meetings, Council members and Board members have transparent conversations about generational differences in the workplace that give employers a perspective they are unlikely to get from the employees within their own companies.

Discussion groups and panels

Another Generation Work partnership strategy for elevating young adult worker voice is to convene discussion groups and panels—typically organized to address specific topics, events, or issues—that provide structured or semi-structured opportunities for young adults to share their personal career experiences and insights directly with employers. The goal is to encourage honest exchange, deepen mutual understanding, and generate actionable ideas for making workplaces more supportive and inclusive.

Local partnerships use a variety of formats to bring young adults and employers together. In Chicago and Indianapolis, young adults serve as panelists in sessions with employers participating in the partnerships' cohort models, sharing personal experiences and perspectives directly with employers. This gives employers insights into workplace realities that they might not otherwise hear from young adult workers, and can deepen the conversations between employers themselves.

In Louisville, the partnership organizes roundtables where young adult workers and employers can discuss barriers, challenges, and opportunities for change. Some discussions are held with larger groups about general workplace practices, moderated by a trained facilitator. Other discussions are smaller, non-moderated dialogues between one employer and a group of young adults designed to provide targeted feedback to the employer on company-specific policies.

In Cleveland, local partner staff, employers, and young adults each reviewed the same survey of workplace policies and practices (described below) and came together to discuss which policies and practices were more important to young adults. This discussion helped identify priorities that the local partnership hadn't considered before, and employers were able to hear directly from young adults about what they value in the workplace.

Employer-Young Adult Worker Discussion Group and Panel Successes

- Employers consistently report that the single most impactful factor in their work on practice change is hearing directly from young adult workers.
- Young adult workers who participated in one forum said they left feeling a greater sense of confidence.
- One employer in a discussion group realized that they should strive to ensure that young adult employees are aware of supportive benefits offered by their company, such as their Hardship Assistance Program.

Approach 2: Incorporate young adult input into discussions between workforce development practitioners and employers.

Generation Work local partnerships collect feedback from young adults and use what they hear to inform their own conversations with employers. This can help identify the gaps between employer expectations and young adult perspectives, identify areas for improvement in workplace practices, and guide workplace decisions.

Focus groups, interviews, and surveys

One way of getting direct feedback from young adult workers is through structured feedback mechanisms such as focus groups, interviews, and surveys. Questions can be framed to elicit information about young workers' priorities, experiences, and expectations for their jobs and careers.

In Birmingham, the partnership developed and administered a Tech Talent Survey to over 200 young adults working in the local tech industry, and a Tech Employer Survey to more than 40 local tech employers. Data from these surveys allow the partnership to compare young adult and employer perspectives on hiring, retention, internships, and workplace priorities, and to highlight key gaps and opportunities. The partnership presented these findings to the Birmingham Tech Council, driving conversation about where there is misalignment between employers' perceptions of worker needs and young adults' actual needs.

In Seattle, partner organization Port Jobs conducts annual retention interviews with young people who have been through their training programs and are using their new skills on the job. Port Jobs staff bring findings from these interviews into their conversations with employers. For example, interviews consistently highlight the need for flexible scheduling to allow young adult workers to attend classes. The Port Jobs team uses this information by asking partner companies about their flexible scheduling policies and suggesting that flexible scheduling can benefit young adult employees.

In Cleveland, the local partnership sought young adult worker input to identify which practices to elevate in ongoing conversations with employers. The partnership has used the [Opportunity Navigator](https://www.opportunitynavigator.org/)^v—a tool that helps employers understand best workplace practices, assess their own workplace policies, and access resources to strengthen those policies—for several years to engage employers in practice change (and has since developed its own customized version of the tool, called Opt-N-Ohio). They identified 15 practices from the tool that best align with the positive youth development practices included in the PILOT tool. They then recruited young adult workers who had received services

Focus Group, Interview, and Survey Successes

- Data pointed to the need to lower the barrier for entry into networking, leading to the creation of youth-centered networking events that became popular with both employers and young adults who might otherwise not have participated in a traditional job fair.
- Data highlighted differences in employer and young worker perspectives on wages, which led an employer to realize that their company's salaries were not keeping pace with local rent costs.

^v See <https://www.opportunitynavigator.org/>.

from partnership organizations to rank the top 15 practices (and identify any other practices) that would attract them to a company. For example, young adult workers prioritized hands-on training and mentorship, having their voices heard and acted upon, flexible use of paid time off, opportunities for career growth, and addressing barriers such as child care and transportation. The partnership synthesized this feedback and shared it with employer partners to inform practices and workplace strategies and better align them with young adult priorities.

Also in Cleveland, Generation Work partner Youth Opportunities Unlimited worked with local partners to survey young adults on what motivated them at work and/or to change jobs or employers. For example, workers identified employer support, teamwork, good communication from supervisors, and a positive workplace culture as being very important. The Cleveland partner organizations then used this information to guide their conversations with employers about workplace practices and demonstrate young adult preferences for career advancement opportunities and supervisors who understand what their lives are like.

In Seattle, partner organization Port Jobs regularly conducts interviews with young adults who work in select aviation career pathways after they complete Port Jobs' Airport University training courses. Port Jobs staff then bring the information about what has supported or hindered young adult workers' career progression to the attention of their employer partners. For example, the interviews consistently highlight the need for flexible scheduling to allow young adult workers to attend classes. The Port Jobs team uses this information by talking to their employer partners about promoting flexible scheduling as a benefit to young adult employees. Employer partners have responded positively to the priorities lifted up by young adult workers and some have begun to incentivize hiring and retention outcomes.

In Indianapolis, EmployIndy held listening sessions with 27 Black young adult workers to explore how trust is built in workplace relationships and culture. The sessions were led by an experienced facilitator using the design thinking method, which is a human-centered, phased approach to identifying problems and identifying solutions. This approach was selected in part because it can create an environment of openness, helping young adults express themselves freely. Participants shared their experiences and perspectives on workplace factors that make them feel seen and supported, with sessions framed around trust and power dynamics. EmployIndy compensated the young adults for their time and expertise and created a welcoming environment by scheduling the sessions at a time that worked for participants and providing food. The gathered insights were synthesized into a report with guidance for employers on how to create trusting and inclusive workplaces that support belonging for all employees. The report findings are now being used to guide learning among a cohort of employers piloting a positive workplace practice aimed at supporting young adult workers.

Effectively Engaging Young Adult Workers in Providing Input

Ensuring that young adult workers' voice is effectively incorporated into workforce development initiatives requires intentional design and deliberate strategies. For young adult engagement to be authentic and impactful, young adults must feel safe, supported, and valued throughout the process. This is not always an easy task, and sustained engagement of young adult workers takes time and resources. An important initial design consideration is the length and depth of engagement needed to meet the initiative goals. Workforce development practitioners should reflect on key questions such as:

- Is feedback needed on an ongoing basis or less frequently?
- Why is young adult input being gathered?
- How will the young adult input be used?
- What structures are in place to ensure that insights are acted upon?

Actively soliciting input from young adults is meaningful only when employers are prepared to hear and act upon this information. When used effectively, this feedback can shape and strengthen conversations between workforce development practitioners and employers, highlighting young adults' perspectives and ensuring that workplace initiatives reflect their needs and priorities.

Below, we highlight what Generation Work local partnerships have learned about how workforce development practitioners can effectively engage young adult workers in these kinds of initiatives.

Make a plan for how to use feedback.

For young adult engagement to be authentic and impactful, workforce development practitioners and employers should be intentional in how they gather and apply feedback. This requires a clear plan for how to use insights from young adults, who will use them, and who needs to be involved in the conversations to be able to act. Partnerships can act as a bridge between young adults and employers, highlighting communication challenges, barriers, or opportunities identified by young adults and working with employers to adapt policies or practices accordingly. For example, one Generation Work partnership is working with a large retailer to help young adult workers facing employment barriers access and retain jobs. The local partnership collects feedback from young adults on challenges they encounter, such as difficulties navigating workplace communication and managing unexpected life events. The local partnership has developed a structured plan with the employer to use these insights: Managers have agreed to bring issues to the partnership and young adult workers early, so supports can be provided proactively, while the partnership helps revise onboarding and training processes and offers coaching and one-on-one support for young adults. By ensuring that young adult worker input is incorporated into employer decisions, organizations are taking steps to create more responsive and inclusive workplaces while signaling to young adults that their voices are valued and acted upon.

Gain employer buy-in and commitment.

Gaining meaningful employer engagement can be difficult. Some employers may initially view young adult engagement as more of a formality or a box to check rather than a valuable source of insight. Selecting which employers to engage is critical: Feedback is most impactful when employers have the authority, resources, and capacity to implement meaningful changes. For example, one local partnership has established a youth advisory council that meets with a group of CEOs from three small local businesses. While the partnership's goal is to give the CEOs perspectives from their own young adult workers on how to adjust workplace practices to improve retention, the companies ultimately have not had the capacity to act on what they hear—typically because they lack the budget or internal infrastructure to adopt specific practices (e.g., additional leave or providing transportation stipends). As a result, the youth advisory council has had limited impact on improving specific workplace practices, leaving them feeling defeated. This experience highlights the importance of selecting employer partners who are receptive to feedback and able to act on it.

Employer buy-in can be strengthened by framing young adult workers' perspectives as part of a broader overall business case for workplace practice change. For example, partnerships can pair young adult input with data on return on investment (ROI) and testimonials and encouragement from peer employers (e.g., employers who are already successfully implementing practices to address young adult worker concerns share their experiences).

Additionally, when bringing employers and young adult workers together, local partnerships present young adult workers as authorities on their own experience; in these situations, they find that employers respond by treating young adults as valued advisors, engaging in thoughtful conversations that help them reflect on and improve workplace practices.

Consider the reality of young adults' lives when scheduling.

Young adults often have work, school, or family responsibilities that make participation in advisory councils, workshops, or other engagement activities difficult during normal business hours. Employers, meanwhile, operate on schedules that may not align with young adults' availability. To address this, partnerships have held evening sessions and carefully considered timing when planning events. These adjustments help reduce conflicts and demonstrate to young adults that their participation and perspective is valued, while also accommodating the employers' operational needs.

Prepare both young adults and employers to create safe and accessible spaces for authentic engagement.

Meaningful engagement is only possible when young adults are in an accessible space where they can contribute fully. Young adults may need dedicated time to prepare for their interactions with employers: Local partnerships have helped by holding one-on-one meetings with young adult workers prior to their meetings with employers, and by providing mentorship or tools to set expectations and reduce anxiety before events. Tools might include orientation materials such as short one-pagers with key information to help young adults and employers confidently prepare for conversations. For example, the Birmingham partnership has provided employers and young adult workers [tip sheets](#)^{vi} to support respectful and productive interactions, reinforcing the expectation of mutually respectful communication.

Consider additional compensation to promote deeper engagement.

At a minimum, young adults need to be compensated for any time they spend providing input to workforce development organizations' employer engagement efforts. Generation Work local partnerships provide gift cards, stipends, and meals. However, effective engagement goes beyond a transactional relationship toward a mutually beneficial one. Local partnerships offer ways to build young adults' social capital by connecting them to employer contacts, offering resume and job search supports, facilitating mentorship, and providing opportunities for relationship-building and hands-on experiences with later career professionals that extend beyond formal council or board meetings (such as job shadowing).

These approaches help create a sense of ownership, connection, and accountability, which can increase young adult workers' investment and commitment to the project and, in turn, increase the likelihood of continued participation. They also provide young adults with longer-term benefits such as expanded professional networks, strengthened communication and leadership skills, enhanced career readiness, and guidance on career goal development. By offering these opportunities, local partnerships signal that young adults' contributions are valued not only in the moment but as part of their broader professional trajectory.

^{vi} See <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/tipsheets-for-workforce-development-program-staff-to-prepare-employers-and-young-workers-for-conversations>.

Devote additional resources to sustain engagement over time.

Maintaining engagement with young adults over time can be challenging. Participation in advisory boards, councils, or focus groups requires consistent effort from both young adults and workforce development practitioners. Young adults are more likely to stay involved when they see their input translated into tangible outcomes or when they are offered meaningful roles to engage with employers.

For long-term initiatives, young adults benefit from ongoing relationship-building activities, and not simply one-time touch points. Several local partnerships have designated staff whose role is to recruit, support, and communicate with young adult members of boards and councils. Local partnerships that hold one-time engagements hire trained facilitators who know how to work with young adults and support their meaningful participation. Mentorship plays an especially important role by providing continuity, deeper trust, and opportunities for growth over time. Approaches that rely on single or infrequent engagement with minimal follow-up are not effective; instead, consistent, repeated interactions help young adults feel supported, valued, and invested in the work while also seeing the impact of their contributions to employers' decisions and practice.

Conclusion

Generation Work local partnerships are implementing positive youth development practices to engage young adult workers in direct conversation with employers and to gather their input to inform how local partnership staff represent young adults' voices when talking to employers. Each strategy requires intentional design, flexibility, and ongoing commitment: Local partnerships are preparing young adults to contribute while actively working with employers to create space for those contributions to be heard and acted upon—and to dedicate sufficient resources to adequately compensate participants, both financially and through development of social capital. When these efforts are mutual, and both young adults and employers see value in the relationship, young adult worker engagement can shift mindsets, improve practices that support young adult workers, and create more inclusive and responsive workplaces.

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