

Guidance for Workforce Development Professionals on Preparing Employers to Engage in Conversation With Young Workers

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Two things are true in today's economy: 1) [Young adults are the fastest-growing group of workers](#), so it's important to include their voices and perspectives in decisions that impact the workforce; and 2) employers have a vested interest in retaining high-quality employees and improving their employees' productivity. In the past, though, many employers developed strategies to address these two issues without formally engaging youth workers in the process.

Employers can proactively engage young workers in a variety of ways, including committees, focus groups, and/or other projects and meeting types. Within Generation Work™ (see box), workforce practitioners are cultivating and facilitating opportunities for employers to connect with young workers. This helps employers better understand young workers' needs, appreciate their perspectives around workplace practices and culture, and learn about their career aspirations.

Staff in workforce development programs, who work with young adults or who have placed young adults with employers, can facilitate interactions between employers and young adult workers to ensure that these conversations are meaningful, positive, and productive.

Staff can structure opportunities for employers and young adults to meaningfully connect rather than act as a conduit for sharing information or trying to represent young adults' points of view. This tipsheet provides six youth engagement strategies that workforce development program staff can share with employers seeking to interact with young adult workers in a committee, focus group, or other group meeting or project. These tips are intended to benefit employers' interactions with current and future employees, or with

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. 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 advancement and earning opportunities. Building upon previous successes and lessons, partners in eight communities—Birmingham, AL; Chicago, IL; Cleveland, OH; Indianapolis, IN; Louisville, KY; Philadelphia, PA; Seattle, WA; and Wilmington, DE—are now working with employers to improve hiring, retention, and advancement practices to better support young people of color.

6 Key Strategies

- Introduce yourself
- Create a safe space
- Focus on young workers
- Communicate
- Be Open
- Appreciate

other young adult professionals in the community. A similar tipsheet is available for program staff to use with young adult workers preparing to meet with employers.¹

Strategy 1: Prepare an introduction.

Introductions are an important way for an employer to ensure that everyone in attendance knows their role in the company and to contextualize the rationale for meeting with young adult workers in the first place. Young adult workers can be intimidated by an employer's title or position, so workforce development staff can support both employers and young adult employees by considering ways to reduce that intimidation. When an employer is introducing themselves, encourage them to:

- **Make eye-contact with the young adult worker(s).**
- **State their name, title, and organization and include personal information that young adult(s) might connect with**—for example, an employer could share their own first job, and/or why their efforts to create more inclusive and equitable workplaces are important to them.

If workforce development staff are present, they can plan an icebreaker exercise to guide participants through introductions and create a welcoming environment. If they are not present, they can still encourage the discussion leader to plan introductions carefully so that all attendees feel included and comfortable.

Strategy 2: Create a safe space.

Employers should reassure young adult workers that interactions are meant to be open and honest. When the young worker's employer is part of the conversation, it is also essential that the employer explicitly tell young workers—truthfully—that their jobs are not at risk. The employer should also explain whether and how the conversations will be shared outside of the meeting. For example, if notes are taken and names or comments will be shared (even with other employers), employers must communicate this to the young workers. If conversations are meant to be anonymous, employers should state this as well, but also make sure the young workers understand that total anonymity is difficult to guarantee.

Strategy 3: Focus on young workers in the discussion.

Facilitated and intentional conversations between employers and young workers are unique opportunities for employers to listen to young workers' perspectives and opinions on the efficacy of workplace initiatives and policies and otherwise connect with their young adult employees. Workforce development staff should encourage employers to proactively connect with their young adult employees to not only promote the creation of a safe space (as noted above) but also to meet meeting objectives. One way for employers to encourage young workers to engage is to focus on employees' strengths and value their

¹ These tipsheets were developed as an immediate response to a request from a Generation Work™ local partnership. At the time, the partnership was facilitating a set of separate advisory committees with young adult workers, employers, and educators and wanted guidance on bringing those populations together into one shared discussion space. Tips were developed after a scan of resources shared with the partnership and in discussion with their facilitators to identify challenges. Initially, the tipsheets were shared with the local partnerships' participants. Child Trends then adapted them to be more broadly applicable.

perspectives. This can help the young workers see and appreciate all that they have to offer and open interesting topics of discussion. Focusing on strengths can also help young workers identify places where their strengths are not being utilized to the full extent and which, if better utilized, might result in more growth and satisfaction or a more productive workforce. Sharing insights can be an incredibly validating growth opportunity for young workers and is often a positive experience for employers as well!

Strategy 4: Communicate clearly.

Workforce development staff can share the following tips on clear communication between employers and young employees:

- **Use caution with terminology or abbreviations.** Young adult workers may not always be familiar with terminology or acronyms specific to the employer's field or position. The employer should be mindful and prepared to define terms or further explain terminology.
- **Take your time.** When employers take their time and speak slowly and clearly, young adult workers can take notes and learn from them. Additionally, not rushing conversations allows others to ask questions that can prevent misunderstandings.
- **Acknowledge young workers' input.** Acknowledgement and careful listening can reassure young workers that their opinions are valued and encourage them to open up and share more.

Strategy 5: Be open to new ideas.

While young workers may lack years of experience within a specific career field, they bring a unique perspective and lived experience that employers can adapt to fit into their own organizations or companies. Employers should remember that committees, focus groups, or feedback spaces with young employees are meant to elicit difficult and challenging—but constructive—conversations.

- **Be present.** Employers should be attentive and demonstrate that they are present and not preoccupied. They should share why they are excited about learning from their young workers and explain that they are putting away their phones and other devices so that they aren't distracted.
- **Embrace the unknown.** Conversations with young workers may bring up ideas or opinions that are different or feel strange and, at times, employers will not agree with what their young employees are saying. This is okay: Listening carefully can help employers learn more about others' thoughts, opinions, and beliefs and allow a different perspective. When an employer listens to young adult workers, they show that they respect the young adult's opinions and are eager to learn. While it may be easy for the employer to respect those they agree with, they can also show respect in disagreement by listening to, learning from, and considering their young employees' perspectives.
- **Take notes.** One way to process surprising ideas is to take notes. If an employer hears something that resonates with or even upsets them, they can write it down and give it more time and thought in the future. In addition to taking notes, an employer might explain that they want to refer back to what they are hearing and learning.

Strategy 6: Show Appreciation.

As previously stated, young adult workers bring a unique perspective to workforce challenges and can share insights or propose new solutions to existing challenges. For example, while most workplaces are technologically centered, it can be difficult to keep up with changes in technology. However, young workers often have experience with new technology, software, and apps (especially social media). Many young workers may be quick to develop efficient and effective new systems or processes. More broadly, employers should remember that young workers can bring energy and a new outlook that everyone can learn from, regardless of whether these insights are related to tech. Acknowledge these strengths, express appreciation for young employees, and even consider sharing contact information with the young workers to continue the discussion.

Additional resources for workforce development professionals

- [Top Ten Tips for Working with Youth](#)
- [Annie E. Casey Foundation's Framework for Effectively Partnering with Young People](#)
- [The Aspen Institute's Voices from the Field: Engaging Employers to Connect Young Adults to Good Fit Employment](#)
- [Understanding Gen Z in the Workplace](#)
- [Tips for Adults when Working with Youth Leaders](#)
- [7 Tips for Managing Younger Workers](#)
- [5 Things about Communicating with Gen Z at Work](#)
- [Why Are Young Workers Leaving Their Jobs?](#)
- [Youth Hold the Key](#)

Suggested citation: Bradley, M., Lantos, H., & Sacks, V. (2023). Guidance for workforce development professionals on preparing employers to engage in conversation with young workers. Child Trends. <https://doi.org/10.56417/8986x560h>