



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE  
**WORKFORCE  
STRATEGIES  
INITIATIVE**

**Ranita Jain & Amy Blair**

**June 2018**



# **NOW JOBS**

**in Young Adult Workforce Programming**

---

The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Generation Work initiative aims to connect more young adults (ages 18-29) with jobs by bringing together two distinct sets of strategies: (1) demand-driven strategies that focus on building relationships with businesses and factoring in the needs of the local economy and (2) positive youth development strategies such as mentoring and on-the-job learning. Partnerships in five communities – Cleveland, Ohio; Hartford, Connecticut; Indianapolis, Indiana; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Seattle, Washington – are engaged in a multiyear effort to develop, test, and scale cross-system strategies created by public and nonprofit education, training, and human service agencies to help ensure the following:

1. Young adults have the education, skills, and connections with employers to access quality training and employment.
2. Employers hire and invest in the career development of young adults.
3. Practitioners and public agencies adopt, scale, and sustain a demand-driven young adult employment approach through their networks.

During the first year of the initiative (2016), when local partners were engaged in planning, the Economic Opportunities Program’s Workforce Strategies Initiative (WSI) conducted research to learn about the practices of workforce agencies engaging employers to support positive employment outcomes for young adults. Through this research, we learned about how some workforce programs are helping connect young adults to “now jobs” to address immediate needs for income, while continuing to prepare them for long-term career opportunities. **This brief explores the role of “now jobs” in workforce development, how workforce service providers are using wage subsidies to engage with employers and maximize the benefits of “now jobs” to their participants, and some of the challenges this approach presents in practice.**

---

*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.*

---

## About WSI's Research

WSI researchers conducted in-person and telephone-based interviews with staff representing multiple workforce programs in the five Generation Work communities and with a number of leaders of youth- and young adult-serving workforce programs identified through a 2015 survey of workforce providers.<sup>1</sup> Interviews helped us understand the range of job development, placement, and postplacement activities that are provided to young adult participants in a variety of contexts and the types of activities programs engage in with employers. We also engaged in conversations with employed young adult participants who graduated from training programs located in Generation Work communities. These conversations informed our understanding of graduates' career goals and experiences with connecting to employment before, during, and after participating in a training program.

---

## Introduction

Many of today's young adults are facing extraordinary challenges connecting to the labor market. Based on 2016 Bureau of Labor Statistics data, 8.2 percent of young people ages 16-29 are unemployed. This is higher than the national unemployment rate of 4.9 percent. The unemployment rate for African-American young adults is even higher (13.8 percent), and at 15.5 percent, unemployment among young African-American men is more than triple the national average.<sup>2</sup> Estimates of the number of "opportunity youth," or young adults ages 16-24 who are both out of school and out of work, vary from 3 million to 5.5 million.<sup>3</sup> Workforce service providers who serve young adults note that many face multiple challenges to employment. Some have limited or no work experience. Some lack the academic skills or social-emotional readiness necessary for work. Some lack connections to employed adults who can provide guidance about workplace expectations. And some do not have the knowledge they need to explore career interests, identify labor market opportunities, and navigate application processes.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, many employers note difficulties maintaining a skilled and committed workforce.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these employment-related challenges, the workforce program leaders we interviewed noted that obtaining the level of skill and education required for

jobs that provide a good standard of living can be a long-term pursuit for many of their participants. Therefore, some workforce programs are incorporating a "now job" approach into their work with young people. "Now jobs" help connect young adults to employment that addresses immediate income needs, provides them with valuable work experience, and improves their social capital by connecting them to networks of employed adults. A "now job" strategy builds an interim employment step into the continuum of workforce development services that prepare young adults for long-term career opportunities.

A critical factor in whether a "now job" will be a good employment experience for a young adult is the degree to which an employer is invested in providing it. A good "now job" experience rests on supervisors who are willing to mentor and provide a range of work-based learning opportunities for young adult employees. To provide good "now job" experiences, employers may need to examine their workplace practices such as scheduling, training, and approaches to providing feedback about performance. Identifying "now job" opportunities and engaging with employers about expectations for "now job" experiences require workforce program staff to spend considerable amounts of time developing and maintaining employer relationships. Our research revealed that some workforce programs are offering wage subsidies to

## “Now jobs” help connect young adults to employment that addresses immediate income needs, provides them with valuable work experience, and improves their social capital by connecting them to networks of employed adults.

incentivize employers to not only provide “now jobs,” but also structure workplace experiences so their new employees get a positive start in the workforce.

A “now job” can take a variety of forms, including subsidized employment, short- and long-term internships, community service, and unsubsidized employment. Workforce service providers note that offering a wage subsidy puts them in a better position to secure and deepen engagement with employers about the expectations for a job opportunity. This brief describes this time- and resource-intensive strategy and outlines the ways in which offering a wage subsidy helps create a structure for providing ongoing support to both the employed young adult and the employer. We highlight examples from two workforce programs and describe how they have worked to maximize the potential benefit of subsidized “now job” experiences for their participants. The research brief concludes by discussing some of the challenges encountered by workforce providers implementing “now job” approaches.

### Why a “now job” approach?

A “now job” can serve multiple purposes, including the following:

- Help address a young adult’s immediate income needs.
- Provide valuable work experience for young adults who have never had a job.
- Provide opportunities to learn about workplace behavioral norms and expectations and to try

out communication and conflict resolution skills learned in training

- Help young adults explore their strengths and interests, build relationships, and expand their social and professional networks

Importantly, a “now job” can be a re-engagement strategy for young adults who have had negative experiences with employment or education in the past. However, not all “now jobs” represent participants’ (or service providers’) notion of an ideal, permanent job. Most “now jobs” are low wage and entry level. In some cases, “now jobs” may not even be directly on a recognized path toward a longer-term career job goal (what we will refer to as a “later job”). For example, a young adult enrolled in a health care training program may receive assistance obtaining a subsidized “now job” in retail. Workforce program staff would engage with the retail store manager to advocate for a schedule that allows the participant to attend classes.

While a “now job” may not always be aligned to a longer-term career goal, a “now job” strategy is a practical approach to the reality that career paths can be long and strewn with obstacles. “Now jobs” offer an immediate and often necessary source of income for young adults. Program leaders noted in interviews that “now jobs” provide opportunities for young adult participants to gain the problem-solving, communication, and social skills that a “later job” is likely to require them to have on the first day of employment. “Now jobs” can also help young adults explore career interests and develop positive relationships with adults. Leaders also noted that “now jobs” have helped participants recognize the importance



of continuing their education so they can advance in the workplace.

## Engaging with employers about “now jobs”

This brief describes how two programs have used subsidized “now job” experiences to help prepare young adults for “later jobs.” The programs provide wage subsidies for a specified period (typically 8-12 weeks). In many instances providers report that at the end of this period, businesses have continued to employ their participants in unsubsidized employment. In this way, workforce service providers are offering employers the opportunity to hire a young adult at low cost for a trial period.

By offering a wage subsidy, workforce service providers report that they are in a better position to set parameters for and expectations about a job opportunity. In some cases, articulating these expectations prompts employers to consider their workplace practices and environment. These explorations have the potential to benefit other employees in the workplace as well. In their work to identify appropriate “now job” work experiences, providers noted that they seek opportunities that will be a “good fit” for their young adult participants. Employers that provide “good fit” jobs have the following characteristics:

- 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 child care responsibilities.

Providers emphasized the importance of engaging, whenever possible, with employers that are aligned with goals for their participants to continue progressing toward longer-term education and employment goals. These employers are willing to find ways to accommodate education and training schedules and have potential to retain workers after the subsidized wage period ends.

In addition to identifying “good fit” employers, workforce service providers play a critical role in providing career navigation services for participants in “now jobs.” Workforce program staff attempt to remain engaged with working participants to guide them on to education programs or to jobs that offer opportunities for career advancement. Through this engagement, providers coach their participants through problems that arise on the job. They help participants articulate their career goals and work-based learning objectives to their employers. Providers also act as advocates for their participants, helping them navigate issues such as requesting changes in their work location and shift changes to accommodate school schedules.

---

## Program Example — Cleveland, Ohio’s Young Adult Resource Center

The following is an example of how a partnership of nonprofit programs in Cleveland, Ohio, uses a subsidized employment strategy to support “now jobs” that lay groundwork for “later jobs.” Workforce program staff identify “now job” opportunities and help participants prepare for “later jobs.”

### Subsidized Work Experience for Career Exposure and Coaching for a “Later Job”

**Towards Employment** — a workforce development organization — and **Youth Opportunities Unlimited** — a youth development organization — jointly provide workforce programming at the Young Adult Resource Center (YRC), a youth-focused center based in an American Job Center in downtown Cleveland, Ohio. Approximately 2,000 young adults (ages 18-24) utilize YRC services in a year. Upon entering the YRC, young adults attend an orientation where they are given an option to use drop-in services (such as GED preparation, resume development, and financial literacy workshops), or obtain more comprehensive career services to prepare them for work in the manufacturing, health care, IT, construction, or culinary/hospitality and customer service sectors.

Approximately 250 young adults enroll in full programming that begins with a two-week job-readiness training program and includes industry sector and career exploration sessions. Students learn about occupations, job duties, wages, and opportunities for advancement in the YRC-supported sectors. They are also assigned to a career coach who works with them to assess their interests, their strengths, and any barriers to employment. After the job-readiness training, the career coach helps connect young adult participants to either credential training in an identified career pathway or a four- to six-week subsidized job. When possible, these jobs are related to participants’ career interests. 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.

### Provider and Young Adult Perspectives

During interviews, YRC career coaches noted that many of their participants have no work experience, and if they do, their experiences have not always been positive. Coaches emphasized that wage subsidies offer an incentive for employers to provide “good fit” job opportunities and position YRC coaches to negotiate expectations for work experiences. YRC requests that their young adult participants be paired with supervisors who are supportive, motivated to provide learning opportunities, and willing to provide regular feedback about performance to new employees and their coaches.

Young adult participants reported that subsidized work experiences were valuable on multiple fronts. They expressed great appreciation for how their coaches worked with them to identify career interests, presented a range of “now job” choices, and helped them connect to “later job” opportunities. One young participant stated, “They always gave us options, and they never put us somewhere where we were not comfortable.” Another 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 “now 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. He described meeting regularly with his YRC career coach and how his coach guided him on how to converse with his supervisor — for example, to express his interest in promotion at the facility. The young man noted that, on his behalf, his coach spoke with his supervisor about his interest in enrolling in a postsecondary training program and about the time commitment required to be successful. At the time he was interviewed by WSI researchers, the young man was in the process of enrolling in a health care training program and was making arrangements with his supervisor to adjust his work schedule to accommodate the training.

---

## Program Example — Our Piece of the Pie’s Pathways to Careers Initiative

The following example from Hartford, Connecticut, describes how Our Piece of the Pie, a workforce service provider, has structured manufacturing employment earn-and-learn opportunities for its young adult clients pursuing skills training in that field. This industry-specific strategy augments training by providing exposure to the norms and expectations of a manufacturing workplace and opportunities to apply new classroom knowledge in a hands-on setting. In this example, we describe how program staff engage employers who may not have otherwise considered hiring their young adult clients.

### “Now Jobs” That Further Develop Participants’ Skills in a Sector

**Our Piece of the Pie (OPP)** is a nonprofit organization in Hartford, Connecticut, that offers academic, employment training and youth development services annually to approximately 1,500 young people, ages 14-24. Through its Pathways to Careers initiative, OPP works with approximately 200 young adults per year to prepare them for careers in the health care, insurance, and manufacturing sectors. This program is designed to meet the economic needs of four groups of young people: young men of color, young parents, justice-involved youth, and youth aging out of the foster care system. When participants enter the program, each is paired with a youth development specialist (YDS) who provides personalized guidance and access to services to help address needs and barriers throughout training and for up to one year after graduation. Young adults are also coached by a workforce development specialist (WDS) who coordinates work experience opportunities, such as internships, and helps training participants connect to full-time employment after program graduation. Together, these specialists offer a relationship-centered approach to ensure that each young adult participant is connected to trained, caring, and proactive staff members who serve as mentors and coaches to help them navigate any barriers to achieving economic independence.

For manufacturing training, OPP partners with a local community college where students (approximately 30-40 per year) are enrolled in a one-year certification program. Because this college is located in a rural community approximately 30 miles outside of Hartford, OPP provides daily transportation for students. YDSs are also based on-site at the community college to maintain ongoing relationships and help students navigate challenges that may arise during training. After the first semester, WDSs help connect participants to internship opportunities. OPP subsidizes wages for 120 hours of the internship and covers any necessary liability insurance expenses incurred by the manufacturing businesses. For employers, these internships can serve as a recruiting pipeline and provide them with a trial employment period.

### Provider and Young Adult Perspectives

During interviews, WDSs noted the importance of the internships for their young adult students. The internships not only provide on-the-job skill development, but also give students career exposure and valuable work experience to facilitate their transition to “later jobs.” WDSs emphasized that the young adults they work with may be different than typical college students in terms of their previous work and life experiences. Therefore, they proactively engage employers in conversations to inform them about the young adult participants and their training needs. For example, one WDS noted that in identifying potential internships, he and a YDS visit employers together. He noted, “I make sure that [the employer] understands that these students don’t have a manufacturing background. I want them [the employers] to understand that they will have to support training. Because our kids are good, they just need training. My pitch is that everyone has a day one. We say that if you train them right, they will give you more than you need.” WDSs also stressed that they seek employers that are willing to provide regular feedback and communicate with OPP staff should any issues, such as lateness or poor attendance, that occur on the job. WDSs provide coaching services to students during the internship and for one year after job placement.

---



## Final Thoughts

Through our research engaging workforce service providers in the Generation Work initiative, we have learned that employment development for young people should have at least two goals: (1) to prepare participants to obtain and succeed in a “now job” and (2) to continue developmental work with participants to build on the experiences they gain in this job, expand their skills through additional training and work-based learning experiences, and help them progress toward obtaining a “later job” in their career path. The “now job” approach is grounded in a guiding principle that young adult-serving programs “meet young people where they are.” For many young adults, this means helping them obtain employment as quickly as possible while remaining engaged in their longer-term career planning and, once they have some stability and are oriented in their work, developing sector- or occupation-focused training plans to enable them to take next steps toward continuing their education.

Engaging in a “now job” approach is not just a programmatic strategy, but also a systems change strategy. An effective “now job” approach requires engaging employers to consider their workplace environment and their training, scheduling, and supervision practices. This is challenging for service providers that are not accustomed to fostering discussion with employers about their workplace practices. However, it is particularly important because

“now jobs” are typically entry level and in sectors that are known for having variable quality of supervision and high turnover. Engaging with a single business can entail building and maintaining relationships not only with a manager, but also with front-line supervisors. Workforce service provider staff engage with supervisors to negotiate expectations about the types of guidance, schedules, and work responsibilities their participants will experience on the job. This can be challenging when the supervisors may not have much experience, be trained in positive supervisory practices, or receive support from their own managers. Compounding this, when employer contacts leave a company or move into a new position, workplace program staff must forge relationships with their replacements.

Program staff engage in activities designed to support their employed participants’ work experiences and maintain contact over what can be extended periods of time. Sometimes “now jobs” do not work out as planned. In these cases, workforce program staff attempt to problem-solve with employers and participants. Program leaders noted that providing a wage subsidy can bolster their confidence and provide standing to ask difficult questions and to advocate for employers to take young workers’ needs into account. This level of job coaching and employer engagement is resource-intensive for workforce program staff. However, it is necessary to help participants make progress over time and to remain engaged with workforce programs so they can continue the education and training they need to advance beyond “now jobs” into “later jobs.”



Building supported “now job” strategies into the continuum of workforce development services represents a significant expansion of the traditional job developer role in which staff are charged with referring individuals to jobs, collecting data about short-term retention, and then “exiting” a participant from their caseload. The type of relationship building required for an effective “now job” approach is complex, resource-intensive, nonlinear, and never “finished.” At many levels of a workforce program, staff are engaged in the work of job development, coaching, employer engagement, and work retention support. Workforce program leaders use public funds, such as Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act youth funds, and augment these with resources from other public funds and private funders to finance the comprehensive and long-term suite of services required for an effective “now job” strategy. Developing capacity for this type of “braiding” of funds from multiple sources that usually have different eligibility requirements, performance metrics, and time frames for reporting, is challenging. Thus, programs must devote considerable resources on several fronts to support the longevity of contact and range of services required to build their own staff capacity, establish and maintain relationships with employers, and engage with young people to help them establish stability and make progress toward longer-term education and career goals.

We recognize that providing and managing wage-subsidized employment is intensive. It is expensive, and service providers or workforce partnerships likely cannot

offer it to many of the employers and young people with whom they work. But a wage subsidy does give the service provider a “hook” or tool that it can use to develop deeper employer relationships. And the structured nature of the strategy creates a framework for providing a higher level of support to both young people and employers. The current reality is that most young people will not obtain subsidized or intensively supported “now jobs.” Thus, it is important to think about which young people and employers this approach is best used for and how experiences and learning from employer engagement in a wage-subsidized context can be modified for and inform job development practices more broadly.

We hope that this brief is a helpful contribution to discussions about the role of subsidized employment in workforce development programming for young people. We also hope it offers workforce service providers practical issues to consider as they engage with employers to strategize about how, together, they can develop and retain the skilled workforce employers need while also helping a young person gain work experience. Finally, we hope that this brief gives investors in workforce strategies for young people insight about the level of engagement and effort required of service providers to incorporate effective “now job” strategies into the longer-term continuum of education and skills development needed for young people to progress toward their career goals.

## Acknowledgements

The Aspen Institute’s Workforce Strategies Initiative would like to thank a number of individuals and organizations that made this research brief possible. First of all, we thank the community-based leaders who shared their candid and thoughtful reflections about their work helping to connect young adults for employment. This research brief would not have been possible without their work and dedication to this issue. In particular, we thank Jill Rizika and Robin Smalley from Towards Employment; Eric Matheny from Youth Opportunities Unlimited; Rebecca Kusner from R4 Workforce; Kaci Roach from New Growth Group in Cleveland, Ohio; Paula Gilberto from United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut; and Hector Rivera from Our Piece of the Pie in Hartford, Connecticut. We are especially grateful to them for providing us access to information and documentation about their work and for organizing opportunities for us to meet with project partners and their training participants – to whom we are grateful for sharing their personal experiences with us. We also thank the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their generous support of our research and are especially grateful to Laura Burgher, Allison Gerber, and Sheila Maguire for their guidance and thoughtful feedback on this research brief.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ranita Jain and Maureen Conway, “Connecting Young Adults to Employment: Results from a National Survey of Service Providers” (The Aspen Institute, Washington, DC, January 2016), <https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2016/01/YAemploy.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Calculated based on “2016 Current Population Survey Data,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed May 2017, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat03.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Ross and Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, “Employment and Disconnection Among Teens and Young Adults: The Role of Place, Race and Education” (Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, March 24, 2016), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/employment-and-disconnection-among-teens-and-young-adults-the-role-of-place-race-and-education/>; Kristen Lewis and Sarah Burd-Sharps, “Zeroing In on Place and Race: Youth Disconnection in American’s Cities” (Opportunity Nation and Measure of America, Washington, DC, June 2015), <http://www.measureofamerica.org/youth-disconnection-2015/>.

<sup>4</sup> Jain and Conway, “Connecting Young Adults.”

<sup>5</sup> “Global Human Capital Trends 2014,” Deloitte University Press, 2016, February 2017, <https://dupress.deloitte.com/dup-us-en/focus/human-capital-trends/2014.html?icid=hp:ft:01>.

---

## For more information

To learn more, visit [aspeninstitute.org/wsi](https://aspeninstitute.org/wsi).

Stay up-to-date with the Workforce Strategies Initiative by joining our mailing list and following us on social media:



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



[Facebook.com/AspenWSI](https://facebook.com/AspenWSI)



[LinkedIn.com/Company/Economic-Opportunities-Program](https://LinkedIn.com/Company/Economic-Opportunities-Program)

---

*2018 by the Workforce Strategies Initiative,  
an initiative of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program*

*Published in the United States of America*

*© 2018 by the Aspen Institute  
All rights reserved*

*Learn more at [aspeninstitute.org/wsi](https://aspeninstitute.org/wsi)*



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20036