PROMOTING SUCCESS

What it takes to move beyond an entry-level job

COMMONWEALTH CORPORATION
Building skills for a strong economy.

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About Commonwealth Corporation

Originally established in 1981 as the Bay State Skills Corporation, Commonwealth Corporation is Massachusetts' public-private corporation focused on narrowing the skills gap and enhancing our state's workforce, businesses, youth and young adults, and economy. With a $55 million budget and offices across the state, Commonwealth Corporation works with hundreds of Massachusetts companies, thousands of new and experienced workers, and tens of thousands of youth and young adults each year. Commonwealth Corporation's goal is to extend Massachusetts' leadership in education and training, and its overall prosperity, by ensuring that all people benefit from our economy.

Acknowledgments

Commonwealth Corporation would like to thank the many businesses, workforce development professions, business associations and youth employment organizations that supported this research by participating in and helping to organize interviews, focus groups, sharing our survey with members, and offering their expertise. We would also like to thank the dozens of young adult workers we spoke with, who shared the stories from their work, education and career preparation experiences with us. We learned a great deal, and this research would not have been possible without their assistance.

We would also like to thank SkillWorks for their support of this work and their participation in reviewing drafts of our findings.

Many thanks to the Commonwealth Corporation board of directors, who first initiated this line of inquiry and supported our research and offered guidance along the way.

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Letter from the President & CEO of Commonwealth Corporation

Work is changing, from the emergence of the gig economy to the increased reliance on technology across every industry in Massachusetts. At Commonwealth Corporation, we work tirelessly to prepare Massachusetts workers and businesses for the future of work. It is essential to help the people, businesses, and partner organizations we serve reach their full potential. We work closely with the Baker-Polito administration, under the leadership of Secretary Rosalin Acosta, to invest in strategies and programs that help build an ever-stronger economy.

In response to a declining rate of youth employment and employer challenges recruiting workers with the necessary skills, we launched a research effort that culminated in our 2013 study, *Signaling Success*. Since that time, we've developed a comprehensive curriculum called Signal Success, designed and tested by education and workforce partners to help young people develop essential skills for future success in the labor market. This curriculum is being used not just in Massachusetts, but in cities across the country to prepare young workers. The next logical step in this research follows with this study. Promoting Success offers insights and tools for employers and workforce development professionals to help young adult workers in entry-level jobs take advantage of advancement opportunities.

Some key highlights from the research are:

- Businesses often do not have systems in place to let entry-level workers know when opportunities for promotion are available. Many managers and supervisors expect workers to reach out on their own when they are interested in advancement.
- Business owners and managers told us that a key component to retaining and growing their talent from within is ensuring that supervisors spend time getting to know and build relationships with their entry-level workers. These relationships help them respond to challenges workers are facing before they turn into more serious problems.
- Many young adult workers, particularly those who have been involved in the justice system or who have family responsibilities, are juggling family care needs and postsecondary education along with work. Assuming these workers are unwilling to work inconvenient shifts, without understanding the scope of their obligations can lead to misunderstandings that are detrimental not only to the worker and their success, but also to the business trying to minimize turnover and attrition.

These are just a few of our findings. We are thrilled to share our latest research with you and hope you find it useful in your work.

Sincerely,

J.D. LaRock

Executive Summary

We conducted this research to help inform young adult workers and youth employment practitioners about the skills and credentials necessary to progress beyond entry-level employment. Though much of this work focuses on young adults, this information also has relevance for adult employment audiences—particularly those working with individuals who have had limited attachment to the labor force. Our findings led us to develop a set of approaches for businesses to support promotion and advancement within their organizations. These approaches can bridge the gap between young adult workers' understandings and expectations of the workplace and businesses' understandings and expectations of workers. We also developed a set of tips for youth serving organizations to help prepare workers in entry-level positions for upward mobility.

Employer perspectives:

We conducted a survey of businesses across the Commonwealth; 232 businesses responded. Because the responses included a disproportionate number of manufacturing and health care establishments, we followed up with focus groups and interviews in other sectors.

- Seventy (70) percent of respondents to our business survey reported that they did not have a formal advancement or promotion policy in place at their organization.
- Forty-one (41) percent of respondents reported that a bachelor's degree was important for career progression. Forty-eight (48) percent of respondents reported that some college or an associate's degree was important. Only six percent of respondents reported they did not hire individuals with less than a bachelor's degree.
- Businesses reported that mastery of current position, English language proficiency, in-house training, and previous work experience were technical skills that were very important for advancement.
- Employers definitively recognized soft-skills as essential for career progression. Communication, problem solving, initiative, and collaboration were identified as particularly necessary for promotion.
- We asked survey respondents to rank the most important factors for advancement across both technical and soft-skills. Demonstrated mastery of current position, soft-skills, and previous work experience were identified as the most important factors for advancement.

We held focus groups and interviews with employers which offered deeper insights. Employers discussed wanting to encourage mentoring relationships between staff, managers, and young adult workers, but said they expected workers to seek these out on their own.

- Initiative, self-confidence, motivation, critical thinking and problem solving were all raised as important. Employers valued candidates for promotion who clearly demonstrated experience working in teams and across different industries, occupations and settings.
- Few organizations we spoke with had specific career pathways developed for roles within their firms, other than required certifications, experience or content knowledge.
- Employers noted that hidden disabilities, family responsibilities, substance use, and debt made it challenging for workers to seek and access advancement opportunities.

Young adult worker perspectives:

We held several interviews and focus groups with young adult workers to enhance our understanding of their experiences and thoughts related to progression in the workforce.

- Young adult workers learn about careers and the requirements for them from online platforms (zip recruiter, indeed, job quest, etc), word of mouth or going straight to a company and asking.

- Young adult workers seek guidance about career trajectories and advancement opportunities from teachers, family and mentors. Some have had negative experiences going to managers or co-workers.
- Pay, hours, flexibility, and benefits are important to young adult workers when considering advancement opportunities and career paths. Young adults who care for family members or have their own children are particularly concerned with access to paid time off and schedule flexibility and predictability. Many of the young adults we spoke to were interested in careers where they could grow, learn new skills, and have access to training.
- Young adult workers identify many of the same skill requirements necessary for promotion that employers expect. Many of the young adults we spoke with understood that further education and training was necessary to move into a life/family sustaining career.

Overview of the Research

Commonwealth Corporation has been studying the underlying causes of the decline in youth employment for several years. In 2013 we published two studies, *Signaling Success: Boosting Teen Employment Prospects*, and *Building Blocks of Labor Market Success*, which together explored how employers perceived the youth labor market and the skills and behaviors they found necessary for finding and retaining a job today. Here we take the next step in understanding how to prepare young adult workers and entry-level workers to navigate their careers and prepare and present themselves for advancement opportunities.

Commonwealth Corporation undertook research in order to understand:

- The skills, credentials, work experience and behaviors that employers are looking for in employees for promotion or career progression,
- Young adult perceptions of industries and the related careers or occupations within them and
- Young adult knowledge of skills, credentials, work experience and behaviors necessary for career progression.

We define promotion or advancement as a job with new or more responsibility and/or higher wages, leading to more experience either within a single organization or in a new organization. We use promotion and advancement interchangeably throughout this paper.

Our research was conducted in two phases. We started our research focused on understanding employers' expectations of entry-level workers in order for them to be considered worthy of promotion. This would help us understand if there were any gaps in understanding between employers and young adult workers. For our purposes we defined entry-level workers as workers with little to no previous experience in the role they are hired and/or who are at the lowest level of the employment hierarchy of their organization. The following research questions guided this phase:

1. Are the skills, behaviors, credentials and work experiences that employers want to see in an entrylevel employee the same as or different from the skills and behaviors they expect to see in a promotable employee?
    a. If these skills are the same, how are they exhibited in an individual who is seen as promotable?
    b. How does this differ by industry?
    c .Does a post-secondary credential matter at some point in career progression and if so, what is that point?
    d. Does work experience in general or in the job for which the employer is hiring (or promoting) matter in the decision-making process about promotions?
2. How do employers communicate career trajectories within their company or industry to employees?

We started Phase 1 of our research by administering an e-mail survey to employers. The employer survey helped us to determine which skills, behaviors, credentials, and work experiences employers require for progression and whether those are different than the skills required for entry-level employment.

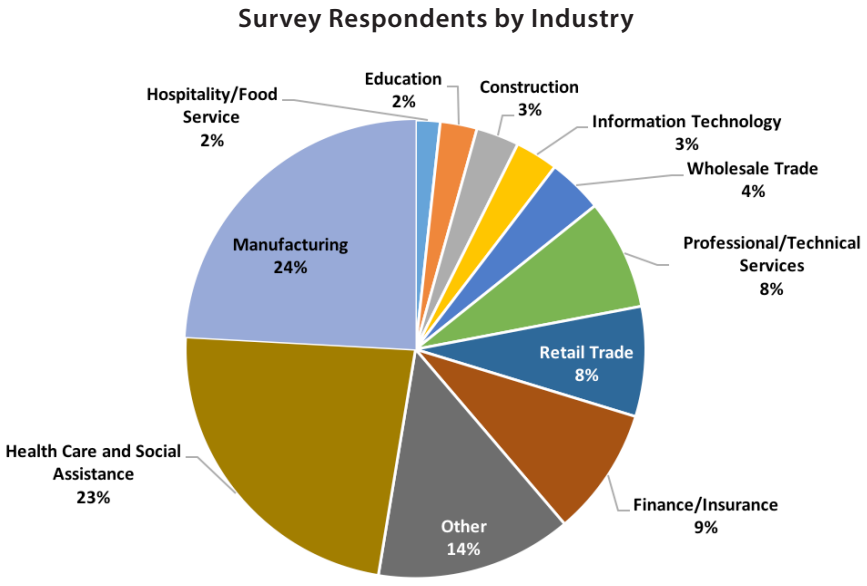
Our survey findings helped us target certain industries and employers for follow-up outreach and interviews or focus groups. During these interviews we sought additional information on promotability skills and credentials and the ways in which they should be demonstrated. We also focused on connecting with employers in industries that were underrepresented in our survey responses. Through these interviews it became clear that when we talked with employers about entry-level workers, they were referring to young adult workers. While we believe that our research may have relevance for workers of any age, our research became more narrowly focused on employers' expectations of young adult workers.

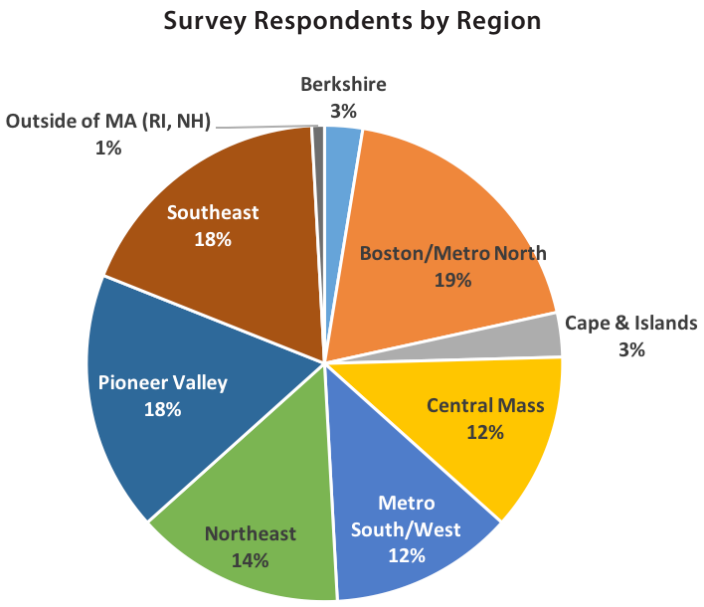
The second phase of our research involved conducting focus groups with young adult workers, 18-24 years of age, to learn how they perceive certain industries, the career opportunities in those industries, and what tools or people help to inform them about career decisions. We led eight focus groups across Massachusetts involving a total of 57 young adults. The participants came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were parents, others held some financial responsibility for supporting their family. We spoke with young men who had histories of being victims or perpetrators of violent crime. We spoke with young adults who were in college and some just out of high school. Many, but not all, had participated in some form of formal career readiness programming and all had some previous work experience.

Employer Survey

We emailed surveys to 2,400 businesses in Commonwealth Corporation's network. Additionally, a number of Massachusetts business associations shared our survey with their members. In total we received 232 completed surveys.

The industries represented by the largest share of survey responses were Manufacturing (24%) and Health Care & Social Assistance (23%). In cases where responses varied meaningfully by industry, we address that variation in the findings. However, our research thus far has shown minimal variation by industry and many themes in common across industry.





We received survey responses from every region of the state, with the largest numbers from Boston/Metro North, the Pioneer Valley and the Southeast. Since our primary intent was not to draw statistical conclusions based on region and we received responses from each region of the state, we did not attempt to address geographic mix in the employer focus group and interview phase.

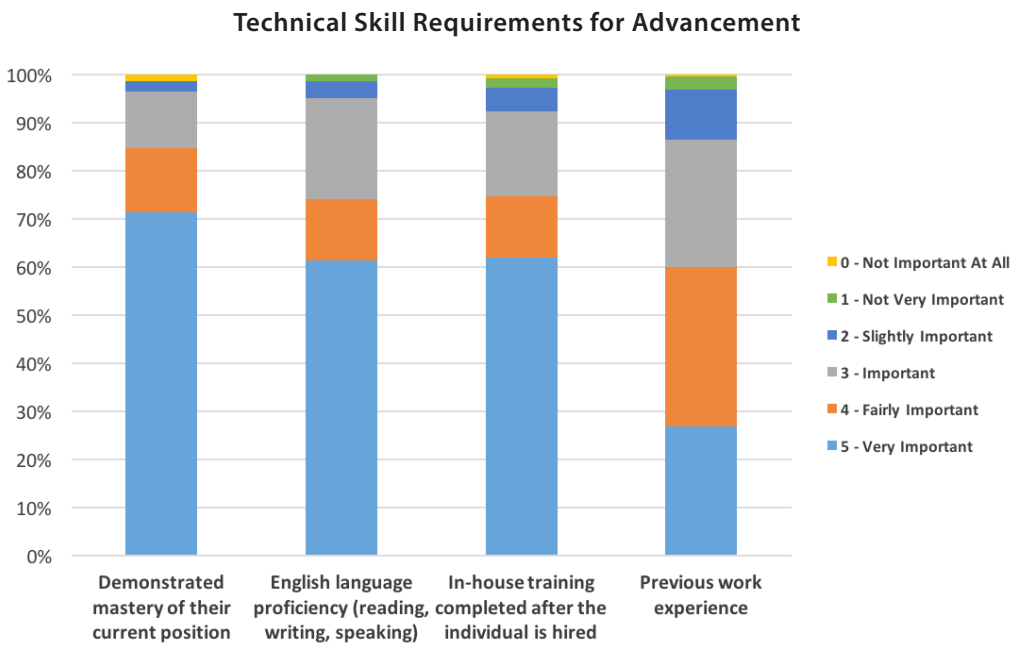
SURVEY FINDINGS

Importance of Work Experience, Mastery of Current Job and In-house Training for Advancement:

- In-house training was rated as very important for advancement by 60% of respondents and as important or fairly important by another 32%.
- Demonstrated mastery of an employee's current position was rated as very important by 71% of respondents and important or fairly important by 26%.
- Previous work experience was rated as very important by 26% of respondents and as important or fairly important by more than 60% of respondents.

Importance of English Language Proficiency for Advancement:

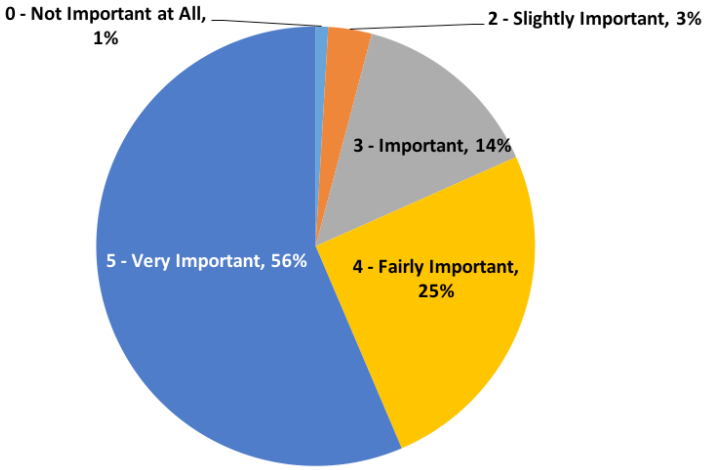
English language proficiency was rated as important to very important for advancement by 95% of respondents.



Soft Skills:

Survey responses indicated that soft skills are critical to entry-level employees being determined as ready for advancement.

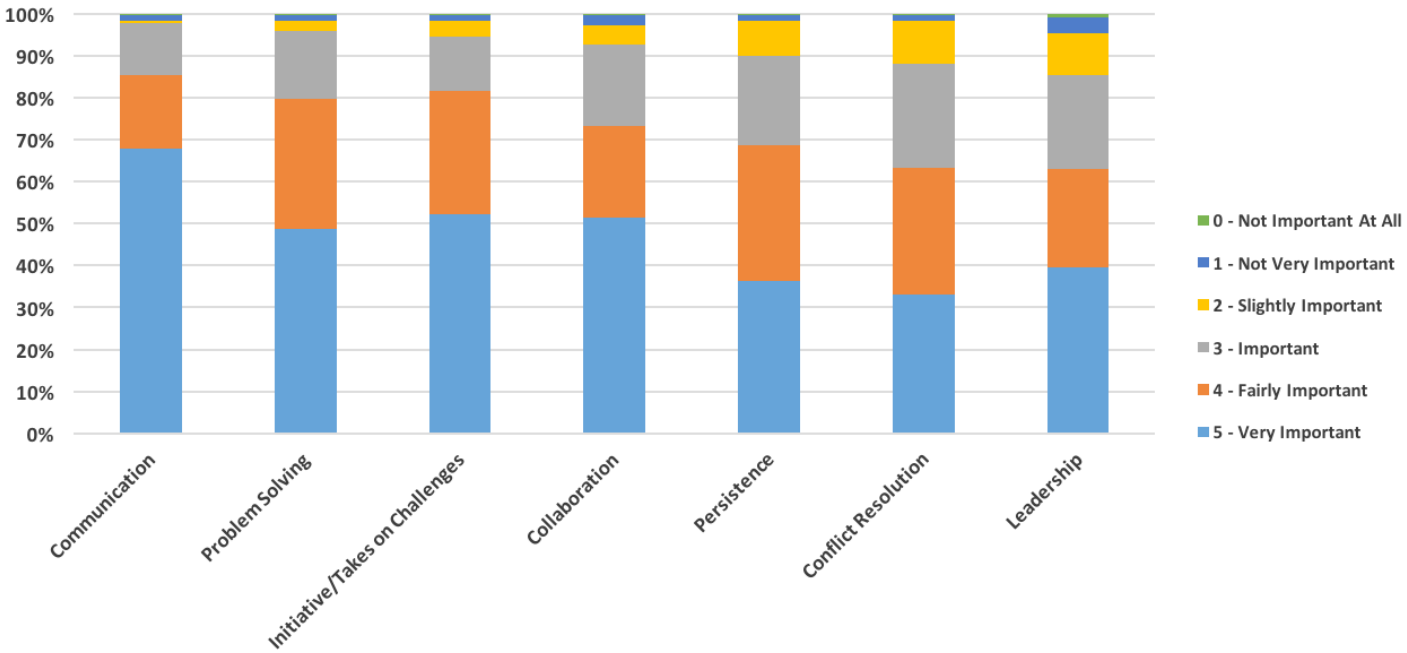
How important are soft skills to the career progression of entry-level employees?



The relevance of soft skills to career progression was rated as important to very important by 97% of respondents.

- Communication was rated as important to very important by 98% of respondents.
- Collaboration was rated as important to very important by 93% of respondents.
- Conflict resolution was rated as important to very important by 88% of respondents.
- Initiative was rated as important to very important by 95% of respondents.
- Problem-solving was rated as important to very important by 97% of respondents.
- Leadership was rated as important to very important by 85% of respondents.

Soft-skills necessary for an entry-level employee to be deemed promotable

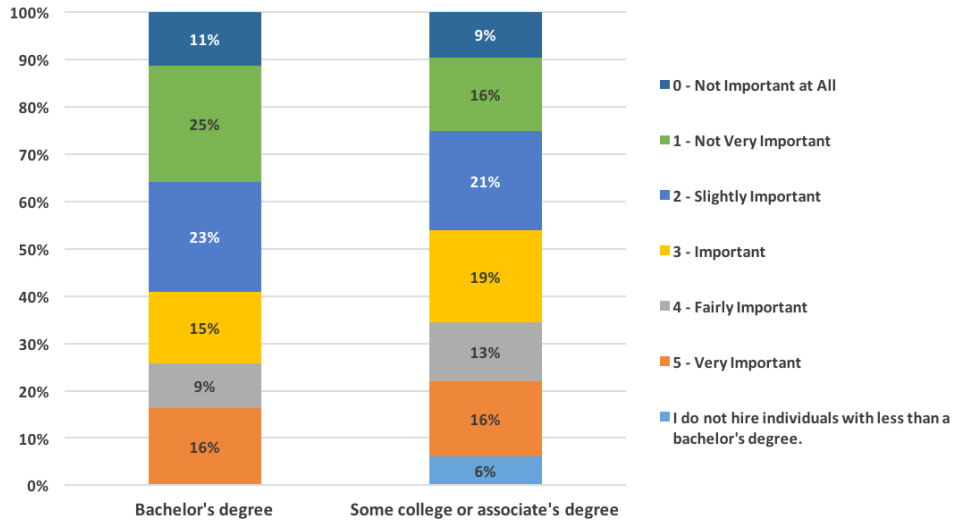


Importance of Educational Attainment to Advancement:

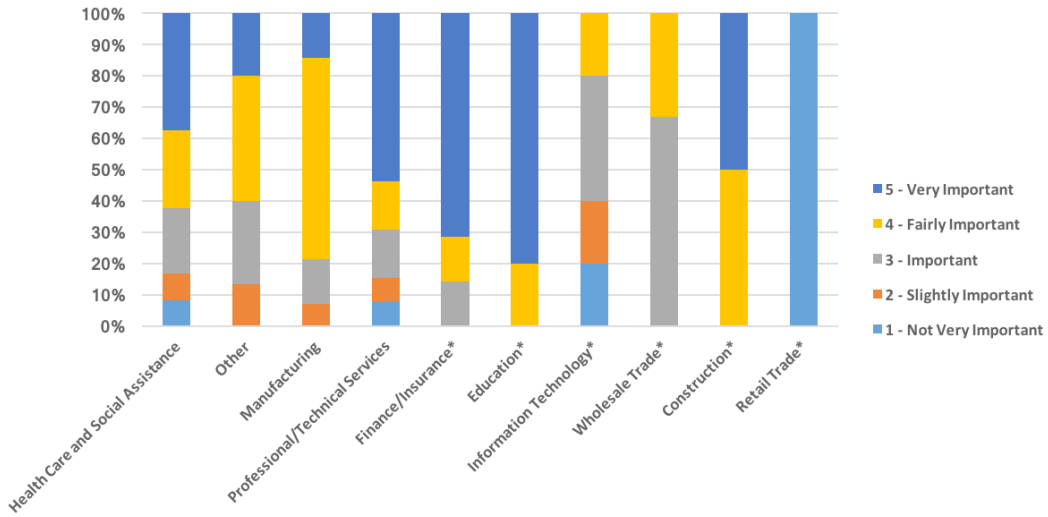
The survey results paint a somewhat confusing picture in the area of post-secondary educational credentials.

A bachelor's degree was rated as not important at all or not very important for promotion by 36% of respondents; 23% rated it as slightly important and 40% rated it as important to very important. Responses differed widely by industry according to what you might expect: fields that require post-secondary degrees and certifications or licenses, such as Education, showed a high preference for post-secondary educational attainment.

On a scale of 0-5 what are the technical requirements necessary for an entry-level employee to be considered promotable?



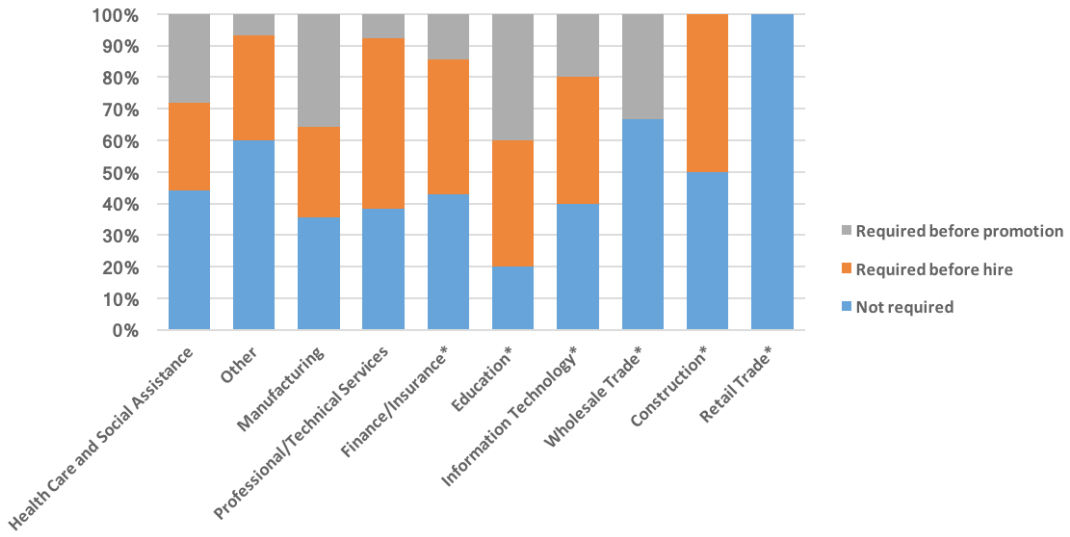
How important is the specific field of study to advancement in your organization?



Note: Industries marked with a "*" indicate fewer than ten responses for that category.

- Some college or an associate's degree was rated not important at all or not very important for promotion by 25% of respondents; 21% rated it as slightly important and 48% rated it as important to very important; 6% of respondents stated they do not hire individuals with less than a Bachelor's degree. Again, this differed widely by industry.
- We asked those who responded that some post-secondary education was in any way important for promotion to tell us "how important is the specific field of study to advancement in your organization." Of those who responded, 12% said specific field of study was not important at all or not very important; 17% said slightly important and 71% said it was important to very important.
- However, when asked when are entry-level employees required to gain post-secondary credentials, 67% said they are not required, 19% said they were required before hire and 14% said they were required before promotion. This seems to contradict the responses to our previous question. However, when you look at the breakdowns by industry, you see that health care, manufacturing and education, which require industry-recognized certifications and credentials, are those that responded that post-secondary credentials are required for promotion.

When are entry-level workers required to gain post-secondary credentials?

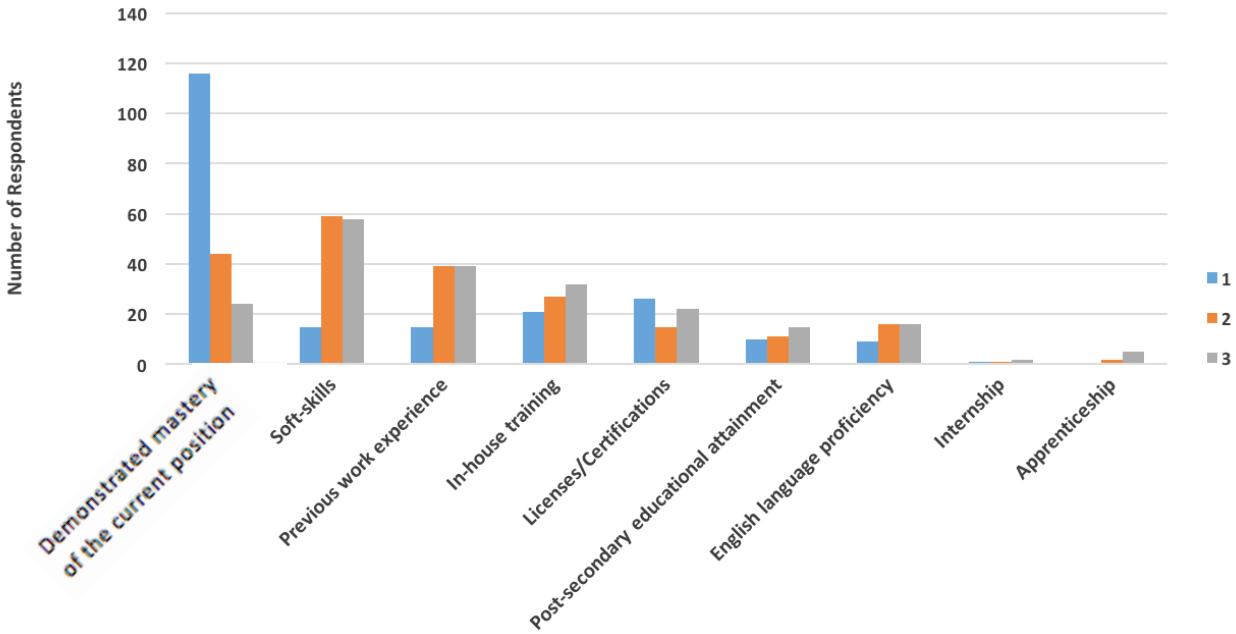


Note: Industries marked with a "*" indicate fewer than ten responses for that category.

When taken on their own, the responses on the importance of educational attainment can be seen as solely industry specific. However, when digested along with employer responses on previous work experience, soft skills and mastery of the current position it fits into the narrative well. Education is key, but it is not the biggest factor for promotion (which is detailed in the next section). Additionally, employers continue to critique the education system for not arming students with the skills crucial for persistence in the workforce. Therefore, it is not surprising that formal education is not at the top of their list of priorities.

Ranking Most Important Factors for Advancement:

Rank the top three most important factors for advancement in your organization



When asked to rate the top three most important factors for advancement, mastery of the current position and soft skills were ranked the highest, followed by previous work experience.

Communicating About Advancement Opportunities:

We asked about whether firms had formal policies in place for advancement or promotion, and how they otherwise communicated opportunities to their entry-level employees. Most of our respondents did not have formal policies in place, and most of them said they communicate about opportunities when they arise. As we would learn through further investigation in interviews, this is in line with the very informal, implicit nature of advancement in most organizations.

When do you inform entry-level employees of advancement opportunities in your organization?	Total	Percent
When a position or advancement opportunity becomes available	117	50%
Upon hire	88	38%
Within the first 6 months of hire	15	6%
Within the first year of hire	6	3%
Upon request	6	3%
Total	**232**	**100%**

Do you have a formal advancement or promotion policy in place at your organization?	Total	Percent
No	162	70%
Yes	60	26%
I don't know	10	4%
Total	**232**	**100%**

Employer Interviews and Focus Groups

We followed up our survey with focus groups and interviews with workforce development professionals and business representatives in positions such as human resources, manager, supervisor or owner. The purposes of the focus groups and interviews were to gain additional knowledge from industries that were underrepresented in the survey responses and to explore the findings in more detail. The industries specifically included banking, construction, food-service, hospitality, information technology and retail. Additionally, we reviewed relevant literature and research in this area.

THEMES FROM INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS WITH EMPLOYERS

Relationships between managers and employees:

- Rapid shifts in culture and technology have contributed to changes in the world of work. There is a greater need for communication between managers and employees. Across industries, the employers we interviewed felt that employees should "own their careers." These sentiments were followed by the belief that employees must have conversations with their managers about ways to advance and current advancement opportunities available. Employees are expected to approach managers and utilize HR as much as possible to propel their careers. Additionally, employees are expected to utilize performance reviews to discuss and set career trajectories and goals with their employer.
- These conversations are facilitated differently depending on industry and even organization. While employers believe these conversations need to happen, the onus is on the employee to approach the manager. Interviews with representatives from the hospitality industry revealed that employees must make their interests known to managers and that opportunities are posted publicly. However, despite the fact that some employers develop systems and management plans to encourage conversation, they do not always explicitly set aside time for conversations with their employees, whether about advancement or otherwise. Supervisors may approach high achievers, but this potentially leaves competent, even excellent, workers out of the conversation. These "invisible" staff may be interested in and willing to advance, but need encouragement and guidance.
- Employees are also expected to know when to start these conversations. Employers noted that staff should not expect to or attempt to have these conversations within a probationary period or within the first few months of a position. Depending on the industry, the best timing for these conversations can be different. One representative of an IT firm we spoke to indicated

that they were reducing the required amount of time in a current position before applying to another from 18 months to 12 months to respond to the expectations of millennial workers.

- A few of the employers we interviewed said that they post positions publicly for internal candidates, but most did not. Many spoke of more informal ways of informing their employees about possible advancement opportunities. However, all employers felt that communication is a two-way street. Managers must observe, engage in conversations and make the possibilities for advancement clear, and employees must take stock of and ask about opportunities. When we asked employers about whether managers are trained to do this, most indicated that they are not formally trained. In one case, the company was just beginning to set the expectation for managers explicitly and tie it into their performance review process. This company's leadership believes that by training managers they will improve managers' ability to discern the talents of employees and advocate for employees in the appropriate arenas. Additionally, they believe managers can be more intentional about what projects and opportunities they offer to employees.

Mentorship

Most employers noted that mentorship is important. However, it does not carry a universal definition. It is not understood to be the same thing to the same people, or even within a particular industry. We typically understand mentorship to be defined as an extended period of time during which a person receives guidance from an experienced individual in a company. Employers we spoke with described mentorship as this, but also involving building informal relationships with and learning from co-workers and managers who were successful. Some companies are considering and providing mentorship opportunities for their employees. For example, one employer provides employee resource groups, mentorship within the company, and web-based individual career plans. In construction, apprenticeship programs create mentorship opportunities, where the apprentice is openly encouraged to ask about different careers they see and how they can go about training for them.

Soft skills essential for promotion:

- Soft skills are the constant thread that binds what employers value in an employee—from hiring through promotion. All of the employers we interviewed identified specific soft skills that were crucial for promotion. They also described some of the ways they expect employees to demonstrate these skills in the workplace. Conversations with managers, finding and maintaining informal and formal mentorship opportunities, leveraging and speaking about previous work experience, and navigating barriers to success in the workplace all require understanding and development of one's soft skills. This is important for workers as they prepare for all forms of advancement.
- Initiative, self-confidence, and motivation are important to demonstrating readiness for promotion while in a current job. A restaurant owner described looking for employees who could anticipate what needed to be done, based on previous experiences. For instance, once an employee is shown how to prepare a room for an event, can they do the same thing again with minimal oversight? Do they ask questions when they are unsure, rather than leaving tasks undone for fear of doing the wrong thing?
- Critical thinking and problem solving came up repeatedly as important. The ability to understand when something isn't working, come up with a solution and implement the solution is valuable to employers. However,

Initiative, self-confidence, and motivation are important to demonstrating readiness for promotion while in a current job.

it is important to understand exactly what behaviors are associated with these terms. We often heard these terms used in conjunction with initiative and confidence. In addition, these terms were used to describe the ability to self-assess when one doesn't know an answer and to seek that answer out from colleagues or managers.

- Many employers cited collaboration, the ability to work well with others in team-based work environments (sometimes identified as conflict resolution ability), as essential for advancement.
- Communication is also important to employers, not only with regard to speaking with managers (as noted above), but also when having conversations with fellow employees. One employer in the restaurant industry made it clear that communication is of heavy importance; particularly in the kitchen. According to him if the kitchen staff are unable to communicate it will be immensely difficult for the team to be successful and ultimately the restaurant itself.

Career Pathways

When we asked employers about whether there were defined career pathways in their organizations, employers responded that there is no such thing as one single career pathway—few organizations have an explicit career pathway developed beyond any required certifications, experience or content knowledge. Intuitively, this makes sense. Many people describe their career as an experience of trying different jobs, looking for where their interests, skills and abilities fit best. One employer from the banking industry described formal programs their organization instituted to support employees going to school (tuition reimbursement). However, the key to navigating the variety of careers in their organization and industry was relationships. Employees at this bank were encouraged to job shadow or engage in informational interviews for different positions to learn more about them and to understand the skills necessary to reach them. They were also encouraged to reach out to managers to have conversations about growth and careers.

Previous Work Experience

- Understanding how skills like customer service, problem solving and critical thinking can transfer across industries, occupations and settings and communicating that clearly through a resume or interview is important. One restaurant owner indicated that they take time to help their workers understand how the tasks they are doing in the kitchen can be transferred into other work settings, including offices. For instance, prioritizing tasks, working efficiently, and anticipating what needs to get done next are all useful skills in a variety of work environments.
- Reputation means a lot, particularly within the restaurant industry and the hospitality industry. One employer noted that people who have prior experience working in a hotel typically get top priority for advancement at that hotel over outside hires. Employers said that the restaurant industry, in Boston in particular, is desperate for workers. Many restaurant owners in the region know one another and know the type of training a worker receives at another restaurant. One restaurant owner indicated he would prefer hiring someone from McDonald's or another chain restaurant over a suburban restaurant because the operations of these restaurants are well known, giving managers a more comprehensive understanding of a candidate's skillset.

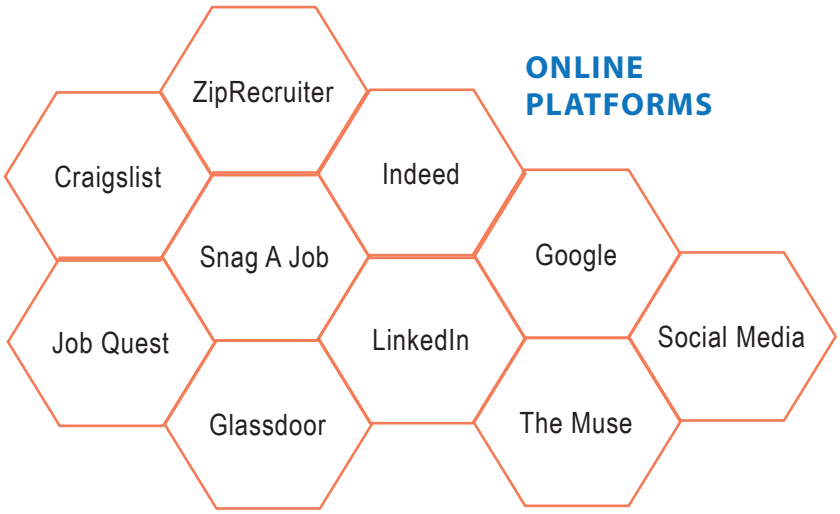
Education

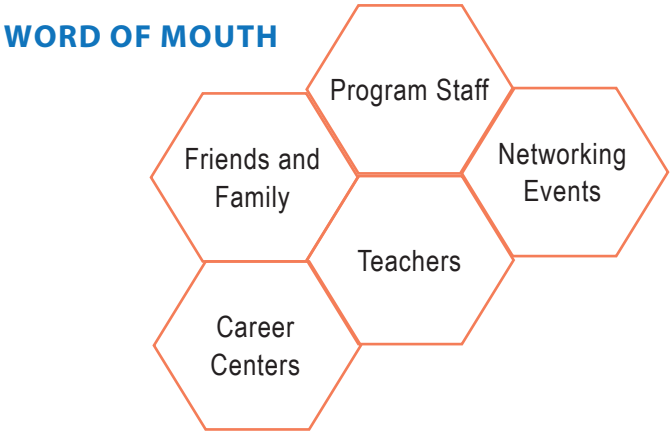
- During the interviews and focus groups there was more emphasis placed on prior demonstration of skill, particularly through previous work experience, than education. One interviewee from the restaurant industry said what's most important is that "they came up through the trenches."
- An interview focusing on the IT industry revealed that it's more important to demonstrate your ability to start a project and see it through than to have a post-secondary degree in a particular subject area. One employer representative in this industry indicated that experience in boot camps and hackathons was sometimes better than previous work experience in the industry to prove you understand the work and can find innovative approaches to problem solving. Meanwhile, we heard from other employers of IT professionals that most of their entry-level workers held bachelor's degrees. These employers identified co-op programs and other experiential learning opportunities/project based work experience offered in college as great ways for workers to prove they have experience. They also considered some extracurricular activities such as leadership in team sports as indirect proxies for work experience.
- In the hospitality industry credentials are important depending on the position. General manager and executive chef positions are typically positions that require a formal credential to demonstrate acquisition of technical skills such as management, budgeting, etc.

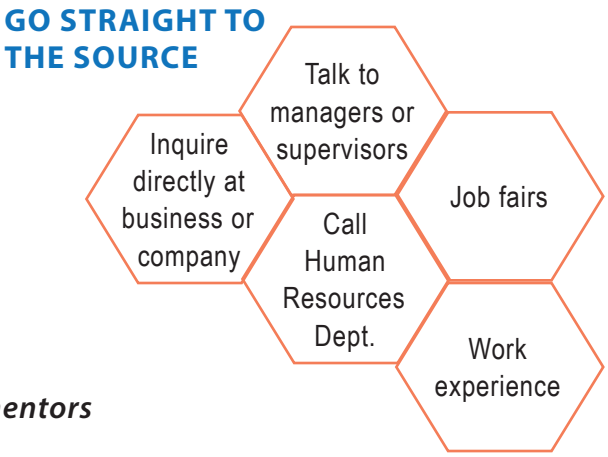
Focus Groups with Young Adult Workers

In our focus groups with young adult workers (ages 18-24), we asked several questions to understand their process for learning about and choosing careers, finding guidance and support, and learning what skill requirements were necessary to move up. We were impressed by how much the participants understood about employer expectations and the labor market. This emphasized to us how important early work experience is, since it is the basis for future decision-making about further education and training, and feeling connected to the labor market in a meaningful way.

How young adults learn about careers







Young people seek guidance from teachers, family and mentors

According to a 2015 Survey of Young Workers, black and Hispanic young people receive less information about jobs and careers from parents and friends than white young people.[2] The survey also found that many young people rely on high school teachers and guidance counselors for getting career-related information. Social capital, a form of economic and cultural capital in which social networks are central, is key to the labor market success of young adult workers.[3] Many young adults of color who grow up in high poverty areas lack access to social capital. A strong network of adults expands the scope of opportunities that a young adult considers available to them and also provides support for navigating the ups and downs of the world of work. In our focus groups, some young people cited family members – a parent, sister/brother, or cousin as playing a role in supporting their employment and career goals. Some cited specific mentors, program staff, and teachers as people they go to for guidance. In some cases, young people shared that they felt comfortable communicating with managers or supervisors about their goals and interests. Others felt less comfortable doing this and preferred to be approached

by managers about opportunities rather than initiate the conversation. Some young people said coworkers were helpful resources to them, although a few said they had to be careful about who they trusted in the workplace. Young workers who have had negative experiences reaching out to managers or coworkers found it hard to trust others in similar positions at other jobs.

Skill requirements/education young people identify needing for promotion

In our focus groups, we heard that young adults learned primarily through their work experiences—both good and bad—what employers expected in someone they would be willing to promote. Many of these attributes were the same as what was required to get hired in the first place, but most young adult workers understood that going "above and beyond" in the workplace helps earn a manager's appreciation. Most of our focus group participants identified the following skills as necessary to move up within an organization: communication (ask questions, admit to mistakes, etc.), good attitude, reliability, efficiency, time management, initiative and follow through, working well in teams, professional appearance and tone appropriate for the job, problem solving and anticipating problems before they occur.

Young adults identified the following skills as necessary to move up within an organization:

- **communication**
- **good attitude**
- **reliability**
- **efficiency**
- **time management**
- **initiative and follow through**
- **working well in teams**
- **professional appearance**
- **problem solving**

Many participants learned about technical skills or education requirements for careers they were interested in by reading job descriptions online. Young people participating in college support programs said there were other specific online resources and courses that helped young people figure out what was required in a career. These young adults had career goals connected to their major fields of study. Other focus group participants had an understanding that without a college degree it was challenging to find a family-sustaining wage job.

When we probed about whether our focus group participants knew about particular career pathways, there appeared to be less clarity. Young adult workers understand that work experience and education or formal training are important, and for those who have a clear career goal in mind, coaching and mentors help them navigate toward it. For others, the future is less clear, and they can see only as far as their current or next job. As we heard in our employer interviews, the concept of career pathways as linear maps one can follow does not seem to match up with real-life experience.

Communication with managers about career growth

Many participants in our focus groups exhibited confidence in sharing their experiences with us. However, when we asked about their comfort level in communicating with managers we heard hesitation. Young people who had challenging experiences interacting with managers were less likely to make further attempts. In some cases, young people who have had already been working in several jobs had very little experience pro-actively seeking feedback or discussing growth opportunities.

Several focus group participants noted that managers liked seeing interest from workers related to promotion or what they are interested in. It helped managers support the workers better and offer opportunities aligned with the worker's interests. "We had a great team because the supervisors and managers told staff clearly what we needed to do and what was expected to move up."

Pay, hours, flexibility and benefits are important to young workers

While learning about what young adults know related to employer expectations for advancement and how to communicate with supervisors about their interest, we also heard about what was most important to them in choosing a job or career. We consistently heard that pay, number of hours available, and flexibility were key to determining whether or not a job or career was worth pursuing. Most of the young people we spoke with were still in some kind of training or educational attainment (High School Equivalency, Certifications etc.). Flexibility to make room for childcare, family and

education was important, as was predictability of schedule to make stable work/life decisions. A CLASP/UCLA Labor Center survey found that only 9% of young workers in Los Angeles in the retail and food service sectors had a set schedule. Only 12% of young workers without a set schedule receive two or more weeks notice of their schedule, and 25% never have input into their schedule. About 4 in 10 young workers have their hours changed or reduced without their input. This survey also found that 72% of these young workers wanted more hours, either working full-time or part-time.[4]

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OTHER REALITIES RELATED TO BEING SUCCESSFUL IN THE WORKFORCE

Over the course of our focus groups with young adult workers, participants shed light on a number of social issues. Work experiences as well as outside social structures have impacted what we refer to here as the youth's "mental model."[5] The mental model is an explanation of how something works. It is a concept, framework, or world view that guides perception and behavior, and is carried in the mind.

During our time interviewing justice-involved young people (under age 21)[6] we found that their mental models included the idea that there was no room for growth, learning, reflection, and advocacy in the workplace. For these young people work was a matter of getting paid. If you didn't like the manager or get along with him/her, then you would have to find a new job. If you were being treated unfairly, then you would need to find a new job. These young adults only spoke with managers when absolutely necessary. They expressed that work was about doing what you were told and going home. These young adults were not thinking about jobs beyond entry-level positions. There was no concept of a career pathway.

This was the opposite of the attitudes of the older justice-involved young adult workers (over age 21)[7] we heard from. They felt a sense of pride in working and thought not only was the money important, but that safety, benefits, stability, and opportunity for growth were essential to success in the workforce. These were critical factors in making the decision as to whether or not to apply for and/or accept a job. The older justice-involved young adults also felt that working made them feel that they were a part of the community; a part of something bigger than themselves. A few of the older justice-involved young adults noted that different working experiences led them to think about jobs they had never considered before.

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One could attribute these differences in world-view to age, however, the age differences are not large. One thing to note is that the older young adults have had more work experience, and through these experiences they have been able to learn and grow. However, this time spent learning can be costly, particularly for justice-involved youth, youth living below the poverty line, and young parents. Their early earning years are vital. Most of the young adults we spoke with felt some form of empowerment and self-actualization through work experience. When speaking with young adults with disabilities (visible and invisible), they were clear that work allowed them to feel confident and that they did not feel confined to a position. Their biggest concerns with regard to advancement were culture, flexibility, and the opportunity to learn and grow, as they want to ensure that they are able to succeed in a new role knowing that they will need certain accommodations.

IMPACT OF CAREER-READINESS PROGRAMS

There was a distinct difference between the perspective offered by young adults who had received coaching or training through a formal job readiness program and those who had some previous work experience but had not received formal coaching. Overall, both groups were equally knowledgeable about what skills were important to employers. However, their language and mindsets differed. Young people who had no formal coaching would leave jobs if they felt they were not getting enough hours, or that they were not getting paid enough. Some were not willing to work certain shifts (early morning in particular), get dirty, wear certain uniforms, or clean up after people. These young people were focused on a job right now and not a career or future opportunity to move up. They learned by making mistakes and getting fired. While there is nothing wrong with knowing what you want to do and do not want to do, and wanting to be fairly compensated, it is important for young people to understand that we all need to start somewhere. Most people do not start in dream jobs, have the best managers, or the best shifts. These uncoached youth showed a lack of understanding of the realities of the workforce.

This difference brings to the forefront the gap between young people who are receiving career support/job training services and those who are not. For the most part, the onus of work readiness is on youth serving organizations or the young people themselves. Many programs serve youth on opposite sides of a spectrum: those who are seen as at-risk and those who are seen as economically disadvantaged but academically capable. The majority of young people are in between; they are not at the top of their class nor are they at risk of falling into the justice system. This is an important gap as it represents the majority of the incoming workforce. Not only does this incomplete career-readiness system leave a gap, but it can unwittingly perpetuate a biased and stifling system. Youth who are in programs that target the most successful young people (by traditional standards) are most often steered towards college pathways. They are exposed to more networks and opportunities to become more polished, career-ready adults. Youth who are "at-risk" are more often steered towards GED's and vocational pathways. This gets to the heart of the youth's immediate needs. However, this approach does not always allow young people to take into account the breadth of their experiences and push themselves into jobs, experiences, and career pathways they may have never imagined.

Despite the attitudes of these young people there was one constant: all felt that there were elements outside of their control that prevented them from being and from seeing themselves in the future as continually successful in the workplace. In other words, it was hard for young people to see themselves as promotable beyond a certain point based on social elements outside of their control; they see a glass ceiling. This impacts young people's performance before they even walk in the door. They may appear to be confident but unable to ask for a raise, hold high expectations for themselves, or show initiative.

Signal Success, Career-Readiness Curriculum

Signal Success is an example of a tool that many Massachusetts-based programs and schools are using to ensure young people are developing the soft skills needed to succeed in the labor market. It is a comprehensive career readiness curriculum that prioritizes strategic soft skill development alongside career exploration and future planning, and job acquisition and progression assets. The curriculum was developed for youth employment programs in Massachusetts but has been expanded to meet the needs of a wide range of schools and organizations nationwide. Skill development in the Signal Success focuses on communication, collaboration, initiative, and dependability, four areas employers identified as key requirements of entry-level occupations, but these skills have also been documented as important across all levels of employment. Lessons are designed so that participants gain new knowledge of the world of work and careers–and of themselves; have opportunities to build supporting skills; and are encouraged to experiment, practice and reflect on their behavior. Preliminary research into the effectiveness of the curriculum has shown that especially with extended exposure participants improve their demonstration of soft skills across the core skills including crucial employment skills that support advancement, such as effective communication, teamwork and leadership.[8] For more, go to www.signalsuccess.org.

Key Findings and Recommendations

For us, this research has offered some interesting takeaways for employers, educational institutions and youth serving organizations. As we continue our work to support the success of workers in the labor market, it is important for all of us to understand where we can take steps to improve. The following are some tips to consider.

TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS – MAKE THE IMPLICIT EXPLICIT

MANAGERS MUST BE EXPLICIT ABOUT EXPECTATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES.

- Meet employees half-way regarding expectations and opportunities for advancement–offer information and guidance on steps to take, skills to acquire, and how skills are transferable. Utilize metrics to evaluate workers and share metrics with them in order to make expectations clear.

CREATE TIME AND SPACE FOR CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN MANAGERS AND EMPLOYEES.

- Foster an open and welcoming culture with opportunities for employees to approach managers.
- Allow time for employees to reflect on their experience and growth.
- Create individualized career development plans for workers.
- Highlight real stories of veteran staff and their trajectories. This provides context for entry-level workers to understand the trial and error involved in growing throughout one's career.

INVEST IN SYSTEMS THAT PROVIDE ENTRY-LEVEL WORKERS WITH THE SKILLS NEEDED TO ADVANCE.

- Be clear about the formal or informal training and technical requirements needed for workers to advance into various positions.

TRAIN MANAGERS TO CAPITALIZE ON TALENT.

- Train managers to recognize and capitalize on the strengths of current employees even if the employee has not approached them about advancement.
- Coach managers to talk about advancement with employees regularly.
- Seek out quiet or less out-going individuals in order to not pass over staff who may be ready and able to advance.

MAKE SPACE FOR EXPERIMENTATION, CREATIVITY AND PROBLEM SOLVING.

- Change the language around success and failure/mistakes; instead of a failure, it's a learning opportunity.
- Offer space in which entry-level workers and young people in particular can exhibit different skills sets, feel safe taking initiative, and change their view of failure.

TIPS FOR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND YOUTH SERVING ORGANIZATIONS – INSPIRE CONFIDENCE

TRAIN YOUNG PEOPLE TO TAKE CHARGE OF THEIR EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES.

- Discuss how to approach managers about advancement.
- Demonstrate how to create a mutually beneficial relationship with supervisors.
- Provide strategies to help them communicate any disabilities, including "invisible" disabilities, which may impact performance. Help them find ways to adapt to the expectations of the workplace and coach them on how to seek accommodations when necessary.
- Encourage them to identify and capitalize on opportunities to expand their skillsets while in their current positions.
- Coach youth on how to talk to employers about barriers to success. For example, young parents may need strategies, networks, and tips for approaching managers about challenges around emergency child care needs and balancing work demands.
- Guide entry-level workers in developing a network of adults, coworkers and others who can coach, mentor and support them in achieving their career and educational goals.

TEACH YOUTH TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE TRANSFERABLE SKILLS.

- Help youth recognize skills learned from both previous work and other experiences outside of the workforce, such as caring for family members, managing complicated situations or finances, etc.
- Make connections for youth between these skills and those required for jobs they are interested in.

CHANGE THE NARRATIVE AROUND TAKING RISKS.

- Portray mistakes as opportunities for growth.
- Help youth identify when risk-taking is ok and how to navigate those instances with their employer.

HIGHLIGHT STORIES OF PEOPLE IN THE WORKFORCE AND THEIR TRAJECTORIES.

- This provides context for workers to understand the trial and error involved in growing throughout one's career.

WHAT'S NEXT? OTHER KEY THEMES WORTH EXPLORING

With all of the efforts going into developing career pathways to guide practitioners in the K-12, higher-education and workforce systems, are there realities to career development that we are not communicating clearly? What more might we do to help early career workers understand about how to navigate these systems most effectively as they learn and develop their own sense of career goals? In a world where "lifelong learning" is becoming expected, how can we best prepare young people with the confidence and resilience to make the choices necessary throughout life to remain in the labor force.

In the course of this work, we also heard about barriers to promotion – what makes promotion more challenging, including hidden or "invisible" disabilities, unexpected family responsibilities, substance use and debt. English

language proficiency can be a barrier to moving up to higher occupational levels in some cases. Our interviews with employers in hospitality and retail revealed that many English language learners want to move up but may not be language ready. A separate interview with an IT representative revealed that there can be communications challenges and barriers to mobility for non-native speakers even in more highly professional situations. This came up less often during interviews and focus groups with employers from other industries. Invisible disabilities are disabilities that are not always obvious to an onlooker. They include mental health disorders, cognitive disabilities, hearing and vision impairments, and chronic pain. Invisible disabilities can limit everyday activities and in turn impact performance at work. These can influence the behavioral differences that distinguish an average or good employee from a promotable employees.

While employers noted that in-house training was important for advancement, they were neither specific as to why this particular form of training is important nor did they speak to whether or not this training was formal or informal. What exactly do employers expect employees to gain from this training? In addition, employers did not speak to the need for external training for entry-level workers. What sets in-house training apart from outside professional development? How do you train for technical skills versus soft skills? Is there any coaching with regard to networking? Understanding more about the nature and importance of training administered after hire for promotion would be helpful in many arenas.

For justice-involved young people and others, how can we help change their mental models so they can make the most of their work experiences? How do we improve how youth connect their life experiences, classroom experiences, and work experiences in order to begin on the path to the workforce quickly and successfully? Are there ways in which the value of work/connection to the labor market can be taught, learned, and implemented without the need for time in the workplace?

The idea of a career pathway must be expanded. The dominant view right now in education and workforce development is that career pathways are linear. Young people have come to expect that they must graduate from post-secondary education (usually a four year institution), jump into an entry-level job right away and then move up in the ranks. In reality the path that most working adults have taken is not linear but includes many pit stops, curves, u-turns, and even gaps. We can help prepare young people for this by simply sharing what non-linear paths look like. Young people can also be taught how to understand and speak about their transferable skills. Providing young people with examples of career paths that may seem different or non-linear, along with examples of how one can make a transition across occupations or industries (as well as what some of the requirments may be) can offer a more realistic understanding of the world of work.

Conclusion

What does it take to move beyond an entry-level job? This research sought to understand whether or not young adult workers understand the career pathways associated with certain industries and occupations. We also sought to understand whether young adults recognize the difference between the skills and behaviors they need to gain and maintain an entry-level job and the skills, credentials, work experience and behaviors necessary for career progression. Additionally, the research was intended to help inform young adult workers and youth employment practitioners about the skills and credentials necessary to progress beyond entry-level employment. Much of what we uncovered informed us of what it takes to move beyond entry-level employment, but that was not all. We learned that formal career pathways are not particularly used by employers to articulate promotion or advancement opportunities. We also found that employers and young adult workers share an understanding that soft-skills, work experience, and mastery of one's current position are essential for advancement. However, while both parties are in agreement about what skills are necessary, there are gaps in understanding. Workers are unsure how to best communicate with supervisors about their interest in promotion, and employers are unsure how to best offer more information about opportunities and direction to young adult workers. That being said, there are ways that employers and youth serving organizations can help young adult workers navigate advancement by offering explicit guidance and support about how to approach managers about interest in advancement and offering opportunities to allow workers to build confidence.

Endnotes

[1] Harrington, P. and N. Snyder with A. Berrigan and L. Knoll. Signaling Success: Boosting Teen Employment Prospects. April 2013. http://commcorp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/resources_2013-04-signaling-success-boosting-teen-employment-prospects.pdf and Fogg, N., P. Harrington and A. Petrovich. Building Blocks of Labor Market Success, Evidence from O*NET Job Analysis Surveys. April 2013. http://commcorp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/resources_2013-04-building-blocks-of-labor-market-success.pdf

[2] Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, Experiences and Perspectives of Young Workers, December 2016, accessed April 2017, https://www.federalreserve.gov/econresdata/2015-experiences-and-perspectives-of-young-workers-201612.pdf

[3] Social capital is a form of economic and cultural capital in which social networks are central; transactions are marked by reciprocity, trust, and cooperation; and market agents produce goods and services not mainly for themselves, but for a common good. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_capital

[4] Center for Law & Social Policy (CLASP) and UCLA Labor Center, "Juggling Time: Young Workers and Scheduling Practices in the Los Angeles County Service Sector," December 2016, accessed 4/30/18, https://www.labor.ucla.edu/downloads/juggling-time-young-workers-and-scheduling-practices-in-the-los-angeles-service-sector/

[5] Feynman, Richard P.,*The Meaning of It All: Thoughts of a Citizen-Scientist* (New York: Basic Books, 2005)

[6] Justice-involved young people are those who are either currently or formerly under state services and supervision, the probation system or other level of publicly supported supervision.

[7] These can include young adults ages 17-24 who may be involved in the juvenile or adult justice systems.

[8] http://commcorp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/resources_2016-signal-success-data-report.pdf