Career Readiness Curriculum

2023

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OUR 40 YEARS OF EXPERTISE

OUR RESEARCH

In the mid 2010's, brain science research, while already an established field, was suddenly and more prominently being connected to workforce development programming. Researchers were pondering and studying the effect that behavioral economics, "nudging," and executive functioning had on adult job seekers participating in job readiness training. At the same time, social scientists and other practitioners were extolling the virtues of incorporating elements of social-emotional learning, cognitive behavioral therapy, trauma-informed care, cultural competency, racial equity, coaching, and goal setting into workforce development programming.

Through an extensive literature review, interviews with on-the-ground practitioners, and input from a national advisory committee of experts, we set out to understand the following:

- What are the essential skills people need to succeed and thrive in life?
- What workplace navigation skills are valued by employers in today's labor market?
- How can the workforce development field support that skill development?

The literature review included the latest behavioral science research and best practices in job readiness training.

This process of collecting, analyzing, and codifying the behavioral-science informed interventions resulted in a mind map[1] detailing the essential skills and strategies at the core of effective career readiness programs.

We also conducted a landscape scan of skills, behaviors, and mindsets needed for successful employment. Specifically, we researched employability skills and mindsets (which we renamed Workplace Navigation Skills), cross-referenced these with skill frameworks from the U.S. Department of Education, National Research Council, and National Association of Colleges and Employers, as well as looked at direct reports from employers answering the question of what skills they look for in their job seekers.

WHAT ARE WORKPLACE NAVIGATION SKILLS AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Workplace Navigation Skills are a set of transferable or "soft" skills that are essential for effective performance in the workplace. Unlike technical or "hard" skills, these workplace navigation skills are generic in nature and are common to all work roles and workplaces across all industry types.

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Workplace Navigation Skills are typically considered essential qualifications for many job positions and hence have become necessary for an individual's employment success at just about any level.

Workplace Navigation Skills:

Communication: The ability to explain what one means in a clear and concise way through written and verbal means. It also includes how one takes in and then interprets the verbal and non-verbal messages sent by others; how one listens and relates to other people; and how one acts upon key information/instructions.

Creativity: The ability to perceive the world in new ways, to find hidden patterns, to make connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena, and to generate solutions.

Critical Thinking: The capacity to carefully discern, analyze, and evaluate information; and determine how to interpret it in order to make a sound judgment. It also includes taking outside information into account during the thought process.

Decision Making: The ability to make deliberate and thoughtful choices by gathering information, assessing options, considering alternatives, and taking action. It also includes evaluating one's choices and the consequences.

Leadership: The ability to motivate, take responsibility for, and lead others effectively to accomplish objectives and goals.

Problem Solving: The ability to understand a problem by breaking it down into smaller parts and identifying key issues, implications, and solutions. It also involves applying knowledge from many different areas to solving a task.

Teamwork & Collaboration: The ability to work well with other people from different disciplines, backgrounds, and expertise to accomplish a task or goal.

Through our research, we learned many things, the most important of which is that the **how** of job readiness training is more important than the **what**. In other words, the strategies used to deliver job readiness content actually matter more than the content of what is delivered. Unfortunately this is where a majority of job readiness trainings fall short. Integration of executive function skills, customized goal-attainment strategies, and a coaching framework is highly individualized work and takes a significant investment of time from both workforce development staff and the job seeker. Implementing this type of intensive programming requires a wholesale culture shift within the workforce development field, rigorous training of front line and executive level staff, and updating of job readiness curriculum, program policies, and organizational operations.

What we learned about how to deliver impactful career readiness and job search support includes the following:

1 EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS ARE ESSENTIAL

First, effective job readiness programs must focus on building and strengthening executive function skills in order to have the greatest impact on job seekers' outcomes. Executive function skills enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. The brain needs these skills to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses. And, researchers have identified that these skills play an important role in an individual's success in setting and achieving goals. To really be effective, however, programs need to incorporate active executive function-based strategies into all aspects of the program design and delivery, not just the curriculum. As Elisabeth Babcock says, "Programs wishing to support clients in improving executive function skills might think about the process as one of first developing and then regularly practicing new routines of thought and behavior. Because new neural connections are built through repeated use, program designers should think about the specific habits and behaviors they hope to change and then create concrete program opportunities for

participants to repeatedly practice these habits of thought or behavior."[2]

While we all have executive function skills, some may be stronger or weaker depending on the opportunities we've had to hone our skills. Challenging life circumstances, trauma, and stress all impact the development and display of executive functioning skills. And for all of us, anxiety, poor sleep, lack of exercise, and poor nutrition makes accessing these skills more difficult. However, "Improvements in executive functioning are likely to positively impact outcomes in all areas of life, including parenting, personal relationships, money management, educational attainment, and career success."[3]

WHAT ARE EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS?

Executive function skills are a set of mental processes that all have to do with managing oneself and one's resources in order to achieve a goal. It is an umbrella term for the neurologically-based skills[4] involving mental control and self-regulation.

Executive function skills can be broken down into three broad categories, each with specific sub skills.

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1. How we organize and plan things:

- *Organization*: The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.

- *Planning/Prioritization*: The ability to create a road map to reach a goal or to complete a task. It also involves being able to make decisions about what is important to focus on and what is not important.

- *Time Management*: The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. It also involves a sense that time is important.

2. How we react to things:

- *Emotional Control*: The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.

- *Flexibility*: The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information, or mistakes. It relates to an adaptability to changing conditions.

- *Response Inhibition*: The capacity to think before you act—this ability to resist the urge to say or do something allows us the time to evaluate a situation and how our behavior might impact it.

- *Stress Tolerance*: The ability to work in stressful situations and to cope with uncertainty, change, and performance demands.

3. How we get things done:

- *Goal-Directed Persistence*: The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of that goal, and not be put off or distracted by competing interests.

- *Metacognition*: The ability to stand back and take a bird's eye view of yourself in a situation, to observe how you problem-solve. It also includes self-monitoring and self-evaluative skills.

- *Sustained Attention*: The capacity to maintain attention to a situation or task in spite of distractibility, fatigue, or boredom.

- *Task Initiation*: The ability to begin projects without undue procrastination, in an efficient or timely fashion.

- *Working Memory*: The ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks. It incorporates the ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to the situation at hand or to project into the future.

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2 A GOAL ATTAINMENT PROCESS THAT IS CLIENT-LED IS MOST IMPACTFUL

Second, allowing job seekers to set and pursue their own goals leads to better long-term participant outcomes. The goal setting and attainment process must be client-led in order to be impactful-participants must set and pursue their own goals. The ability of workforce staff to help job seekers do this and hold them accountable, is essential to goal attainment. "New evidence from neuroscience, psychology, and other behavioral sciences suggests that employment programs may be able to improve participants' long-term outcomes by enhancing their ability to set and pursue their own goals, and that specific skills, behaviors, and mindsets are critical to goal achievement."[5]

An important part of helping clients set and achieve goals is the modification of the program environment. As the Chicago-based workforce development social enterprise, New Moms, has learned adapting "the physical space as well as the policies, processes, materials, technology, and tasks we ask of participants can decrease the cognitive tax on participants and give them more bandwidth to align their behaviors with their motivations and focus on progression towards their goals. Removing environmental barriers to success can increase program engagement, and is a practical, and often inexpensive and quick method to increase the likelihood of participants' goal achievement."

WHAT IS A GOAL ATTAINMENT PROCESS AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

A goal attainment process can help participants strengthen and build their executive function skills by supporting them as they identify goals that are challenging, achievable, and meaningful; and develop a plan and take action to achieve these goals. In addition to directly building skills, this approach can facilitate the development of a supportive environment and reduce sources of stress, both of which play an important role in a participant's ability to apply their executive function skills.

Key elements of a goal attainment process[6] include:

- Staff act as facilitators, helping participants set goals that are meaningful to them and within their reach.

- Goals are broken down into small steps that are achievable within the time available, and scaffolded into larger, more complex, and longer-term goals over time.

- Participants (not staff) identify potential obstacles and strategies for overcoming them before they occur.

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- Ongoing support is provided when participants are putting their plans into action.
- Regular meetings are intentional and purposeful and focused on reviewing and revising goals and plans.

3 A COACHING APPROACH LEADS TO LASTING CHANGE

And finally, the coaching model or approach is the most effective way to actively build executive function skills and affect goal attainment. Coaching seeks to both intentionally build the skills and mindsets necessary for sustained behavior change through repeated practice and reinforcement, as well as (and perhaps more importantly), helps individuals recognize skills they already have that can be transferred to a new context. "Coaching improves individuals' ability to self-regulate; to make informed, future-oriented decisions that lead to economic mobility. These skills and mindsets are built up through interaction with others, and they are built over time through repeated practice; a relatively long-term coaching relationship is the best place to see real growth."[7]

WHAT IS COACHING AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The International Coach Federation says that coaching is "partnering with participants in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential." A coaching approach means working with participants from a resourceful and strength-based point of view, collaborating to explore opportunities, identify resources, and take action. Notably, this approach places the job seeker in the lead, with staff playing a critical supporting role.

The coaching approach[8] assumes the following:

- ***Every participant is creative, capable, and resourceful.*** Though participants may struggle with big roadblocks and issues, they're creative and resourceful enough to have their own answers and know what's right for them.

- ***To give individuals the power to gain long-term stability, you should focus on strengths instead of weaknesses and barriers.*** In a traditional case management model, the focus is typically on barrier removal. Coaching is different. Coaching focuses on strengths: what is working, what is the goal, what resources are available to draw on?

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Barriers are identified and addressed in the process of coaching, but are not the focus.

- **Coaches create environments that make change possible.** People need trust and a positive atmosphere in which to feel safe and take new risks. Coaching helps foster change by delivering services focused on positive reinforcement. Coaches build trust, rapport, and high expectations for what is possible.

- **Greater self-awareness leads to increased performance and fulfillment.** Once a participant has more awareness, they can begin making increased connections between their skills, behaviors, and goals. This can perhaps lead to more empowered outlooks and habits.

- **Change ripples outward.** As participants begin to experience change in one area of their lives, they often are more motivated to make changes in other areas as well.

- **Each individual is different; individuals' rates of change vary over time and tasks.** Success will look different for each person, as will the amount of support they need along the way. Tailoring the coaching approach to give each person the amount of support they need to be successful is part of a scaffolded approach to service delivery and a cornerstone of the coaching model.

OUR SOLUTION

Incorporating behavioral science informed interventions and a racial equity approach, this strategy to career readiness aims to create a culture shift in workforce organizations that transforms how job seekers are served. And because the *how* matters more than the *what*, that's where the focus of our solution lies.

In an attempt to reduce the racial disparities in employment and income for job seekers of color, our solution starts with education and training. While career readiness instructors are our target audience, we know that wholesale shifts in outcomes can't happen until all staff understand the following:

- The fundamentals of executive functioning skills and best practices in brain science research

- The intersection of individual and cultural trauma, racial equity, and the labor market

- How to create a client-centered environment that allows job seekers to focus on their skill building

- Techniques that support active skill development and display, including coaching, motivational interviewing, and the goal attainment process.

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The graphic below outlines our theory of change.

First, we center the job seeker. What all job seekers need in order to advance their careers is an understanding and mastery of their executive functioning, workplace navigation, and technical skills.

These are the skills typically taught, to varying degrees, in job readiness programming across the workforce development system.

The next layer, how these skills are developed, is where our intervention diverges from "business as usual." Through coaching, the goal attainment process, and the establishment of a supportive environment, the assets job seekers already have can be strengthened, and new capabilities can emerge. Intentional program design that incorporates all of these elements takes a significant investment of time and resources. It requires more individualization, a move away from "one size fits all."

However, none of the programmatic shifts an organization might make will be successful unless the following have been woven into the fabric of the organizational culture:

- Knowledge and adoption of behavioral science research
- Racial equity practices
- Trauma-informed approach
- Client-centered mindset

Depending on the organization, this cultural shift might be a massive undertaking or a smaller endeavor.

Regardless, it depends on the willingness of executive leadership to push their organizations and staff towards this new way of thinking and doing business. This is not easy and in some cases, require staff to change their hearts, minds, and behavior. However, without all of these elements in place, the workforce development field is in danger of doing the same old things and hoping for a different result.

To supplement the education and training our solution provides for career readiness staff, we have developed this career readiness curriculum that can be deployed with a variety of populations and program models to facilitate job seekers' development and awareness of their own executive functioning and workplace navigation skills.

The curriculum includes a facilitator guide for both group training and individual coaching conversations. The content of the curriculum includes a menu of mix-and-match activities related to the job search, including:

- Personal Skills, Interests, & Values
- Career Exploration & Planning
- Resume & Cover Letters
- Personal Pitch
- Networking
- Job Searching & Job Applications
- Interviewing

It is our intent that training around curriculum delivery and facilitation (the how) coupled with concrete job search curriculum and activities grounded in brain science research (the what) will positively impact outcomes for people of color in the workforce development system.

WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE, THE LABOR MARKET, AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The history of labor in America is rooted in racism. Overtly exploitative practices and policies like slavery, sharecropping, and indentured servitude have given way to more insidious ones like occupational segregation, tipped minimum wage, and criminal history bans for certain industries and roles. Throughout history, while workers have pushed back and fought for more equality in their work, their victories have continued to be undermined by systemic inequities, individual and institutional discrimination, structural racism, implicit bias, and stereotyping in the workplace. Workers of color continue to be disproportionately impacted, pushed into low-wage work that reinforces the cycle of poverty. And it is within these racist labor market realities that the field of workforce development also operates.

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As one of the most ubiquitously prescribed interventions in the workforce development field, job readiness training is predicated on the idea that job seekers are to blame for their unemployment. That connection to and advancement through the labor market is an individual problem, easily solved by the personal acquisition of "employability skills," such as resume writing, 'proper' dress, interview technique, and 'appropriate' workplace behavior. There is a major problem with this narrative, however—it's not true. Job seekers don't operate in a vacuum, independent from global and local economic forces. They don't control the quality of jobs available to them or local minimum wages. And they certainly don't control the structural racism and individual bias we know exists in the labor market and hiring process.

In the current labor market reality, Individual bias and structural racism are allowed to flourish as candidates are assessed under the guise of "professionalism" and "employability." Hiring managers make split second decisions about who gets an interview based on whether one's name sounds "too ethnic" or appears too hard to pronounce,or whether appropriate eye contact was made during an interview, or whether one's wearing a hijab or dreadlocks. But these judgments have nothing to do with one's ability to actually do a job and everything to do with one's *performance of employability*.

Known as aesthetic labor, these are the "formal and informal organizational expectations for workers' attractiveness, style, and interactional mannerisms that influence which people will be hired to do what jobs and how people are expected to look and behave at work."[9] And who loses out? Often people of color. As Sara Chingati posits, "Job readiness as a practice offers temporary relief from the ongoing anxiety of unemployment, and helps job seekers move to the top of the cluster of candidates with whom they are competing. But it also reproduces hegemonic norms which act to reinforce inequality and maintain the vulnerability of workers and job seekers."[10]

Because undergirding all of this—from who defines what's "proper" and "appropriate," to how candidates are assessed and what the actual benchmarks are—is white supremacy. As Robin DiAngelo says, "White supremacy describes the culture we live in, a culture that positions white people and all that is associated with them (whiteness) as ideal. White supremacy is more than the idea that whites are superior to people of color; it is the deeper premise that supports this idea—the definition of white as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm."[11] We can see this play out in the numerous reports of resumes with "ethnic" names being passed over for resumes with more "white" sounding names. Or in the lack of people of color in leadership and executive positions across the labor market.

Or, in reverse, the over-representation of people of color in low-wage, precarious jobs. What we know is that the job search process can differ drastically based on the color of your skin. With this curriculum, we wanted to explicitly name and attribute those differences to white supremacy culture.

WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE | A DEFINITION[12]

"The idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. While most people associate white supremacy with extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazis, white supremacy is ever present in our institutional and cultural assumptions that assign value, morality, goodness, and humanity to the white group while casting people and communities of color as worthless (worth less), immoral, bad, inhuman and "undeserving." Drawing from critical race theory, the term "white supremacy" also refers to a political or socio-economic system where white people enjoy structural advantage and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not, both at a collective and an individual level."

While descriptions of the current racial realities in the U.S. labor market (like those described above) can invoke feelings of doom and gloom, the goal of this curriculum is to push the conversation towards empowerment. Naming that we are all swimming in the waters of white supremacy culture is a necessary, level-setting first step. It allows us to move away from individualistic narratives of failure, honor the true and real experiences of job seekers, and understand the job search process in a more nuanced way. The systemic change we seek cannot just be the responsibility of individual workers. Collectively we need to work towards reforming systemic inequities. The value in creating the space for these kinds of conversations to take place in our workforce development programs should not be underestimated. It is from that starting point that we can work to empower job seekers, particularly job seekers of color, to embrace their own agency to thoughtfully navigate these realities.

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ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES IN THE JOB SEARCH PROCESS

Much of the cultural messaging that people of color receive can be extremely demoralizing. Rather than acknowledging that the system is deficient, rigged, and set up this way on purpose, people of color are led to believe that they themselves are somehow deficient. The internalization of this messaging can impact all facets of the job search process, from one's confidence to application responses and body language in an interview. Discussion of this messaging and its intersection with and influence on the topics below is what helps set this curriculum apart from other career readiness content.

Social Identities

Social identities reflect how we categorize ourselves with respect to major social categories like race, gender, sexuality, education, etc. These identities take shape in particular social contexts–they can be fluid and change over time, ascribed, or self-claimed. Understanding someone's identity tends to be limited by what we see on the surface, often leading to assumptions about who someone is based on stereotypes, cultural norms, or other standards. For example, a nurse may gender a patient as male or ascribe a particular ethnicity based on outward appearance without asking the person how they identify.

Some social identities—such as sexual orientation, religion, class, or disability status—might be personally claimed but may not be easily visually ascribed. Sometimes individuals will hide one or more of their identities for fear of harassment or harm.

While everyone can benefit from having the time to identify and reflect on their identities, in the context of the job search, this can be even more significant. Giving space for folks to discuss which identities they claim, why they're important (or not), which ones they lean into, or which ones they hide in certain situations is a critical part of both knowing oneself and being understood by others. Employers and hiring managers, like all humans, will make snap judgments based on visual cues or assumptions based on a resume. They may find themselves drawn to a candidate based on a shared group identity, like both having gone to the same high school (e.g., affinity bias), or discriminating against a candidate based on their name, where they live, or where they worked previously. While employers are not allowed to ask about most identities that does not stop them from ascribing identities based on visual perception and the norms of white supremacy culture and standards, or directly asking about identities. This can affect their hiring and other decisions.

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While many employers are undergoing their own training to adopt more inclusive hiring practices, mitigate bias in the hiring process and educate themselves on illegal interview questions, there is still a long way to go in ensuring all workplaces allow individuals to show up as their full selves and take pride in their identities. In the interim, giving job seekers an outlet to discuss how their social identities have influenced and impacted their job search process can be helpful in processing the emotional toll it can take to navigate between different identities.

Code Switching

Originally developed in linguistics, code-switching has traditionally referred to individuals who shift between two or more languages. Today, it is used much more broadly to describe the many ways people of color adapt their language, behavior, and actions to align with dominant culture. To avoid being "othered," people whose identities are not reflected in the dominant culture often change their mannerisms, language, behaviors, or dress to conform. Code-switching is not equal for everyone; some are expected to make more changes than others to conform. The less a person needs to code-switch to "fit in," the closer their identities may align to the culture of power.

In the job search process, people of color may find themselves code switching in order to get hired, fit in, get a promotion, or generally be seen as a leader.

In a Harvard Business Review article,[13] three main reasons are cited for why people code switch in the workplace:

1. For Black people and other racial minorities, downplaying membership in a stigmatized racial group helps increase perceptions of professionalism and the likelihood of being hired.

2. Avoiding negative stereotypes associated with Black racial identity (e.g., incompetence, laziness) helps Black employees be seen as leaders.

3. Expressing shared interests with members of dominant groups promotes similarity with powerful organizational members, which raises the chance of promotions because individuals tend to affiliate with people they perceive as similar.

These types of mental gymnastics and the vigilance required by those code-switching can be exhausting. While work is happening at organizations to evaluate company culture, address underrepresentation, and promote inclusion (not just diversity), it is unlikely that code-switching will ever entirely be eliminated.

In this curriculum, we encourage participants to reflect on when, where, and why they code-switch, acknowledge and name the practice, interrogate the impact it's had on their life, and share examples and stories of times they've code-switched.

By discussing the pros and cons of code-switching, job seekers will hopefully feel more empowered to evaluate their use of it during the job search process and in the workplace.

"Professionalism"

Throughout a traditional job search process, participants are typically coached to "be professional," and adhere to specific standards related to dress, speech, timeliness, and work style. Often, these "professional" ways of being do not take into account or allow room for cultural and social differences; rather, there is an assumption about who exhibits professionalism (white people) and who doesn't (people of color), regardless of how either group presents. As Aysa Gray says in "The Bias of Professionalism Standards," "Professionalism has become coded language for white favoritism in workplace practices that more often than not privilege the values of white and Western employees and leave behind people of color."[14]

Take resumes, for example. They play a crucial role in the job search process and are often seen as a reflection of a job seeker's professionalism. Consequently, they have historically been used as tools to exclude people of color from job opportunities. Traditional resume rules and conventions are extremely narrow and tend to prioritize certain experiences, educational backgrounds, skills, names, and neighborhoods (ie. preference is given to those with no gaps in work history, advanced degrees, proficiency in standard English, white-sounding names, affluent zip codes) that are tied to white standards of professionalism. While job seekers may have the skills and experiences needed for a particular job, an employer may overlook them because of their name, where they live, where they went to school, or where they worked previously. By excluding and disadvantaging individuals from diverse cultural and social backgrounds who may have different but equally valuable skills and qualifications, the resume review process reinforces biases in the hiring and continues to perpetuate inequities in the labor market.

By naming and unpacking these "standards of professionalism," participants can offer their own critique, evaluate the pros and cons of adhering to the standards, and hopefully make more informed choices about how they want to show up in the job search process and the workplace.

It's important to support job seekers in understanding and navigating these systemic biases while also providing guidance on how to strategically present their skills and experiences to highlight their strengths and mitigate potential biases of "professional" standards.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the networks and relationships individuals have within their social circles. It encompasses the resources, opportunities, and advantages that can be gained through these relationships. Traditionally, networking has excluded job seekers of color from accessing employment opportunities as it has often relied on existing power structures and social networks that are predominantly white. For example, many professional networks require membership fees or attendance at specific schools which can exclude people who do not have the financial means or social connections to participate. Overall, professional networks often prioritize connections over qualifications, perpetuating systemic inequalities and maintaining the status quo. Therefore it is critical to help job seekers understand and leverage their social capital by acknowledging the diverse and valuable networks they have access to, including family, friends, community organizations, and faith groups. Additionally, encouraging job seekers to build relationships with people who have diverse backgrounds and experiences, can broaden a job seeker's network and increase their access to opportunities.

FACILITATION GUIDANCE FOR APPROACHING RACIAL EQUITY

So, how do we do all that? In a world where discussions about race can feel divisive and fraught even amongst friends and colleagues, broaching the subject and creating space for this as a facilitator of career readiness programming may seem insurmountable. Outlined below are specific strategies to:

- Increase your own comfort and ability to lead difficult conversations
- Show up responsibly as your authentic self
- Elevate and address equity and social justice topics with participants
- Establish the enabling conditions of safety and trust to be built among participants
- Value the voices and experiences of all participants with curiosity and compassion

1. Understand your own racial identity

First and foremost, to be effective in a facilitative role, you will need to have a clear understanding of your own racial identity and the privilege (or lack thereof) it has afforded you. This is particularly important as a foundation to understanding and acknowledging the power dynamics that can exist between you as a facilitator and your participants. Already there is an inherent power imbalance present as you and your organization operate as gatekeepers to job opportunities. Participants seek help from your organization in getting (re)connected to the labor market and as such, there is an incentive for them to please you or do as you say in order to receive the ultimate "prize"—access to a job. If you are a white facilitator, for example, it may feel uncomfortable for participants of color to share their true feelings or experiences with you for fear of rejection or retaliation. Being attuned to this dynamic, acknowledging it with participants as appropriate, and monitoring your own reactions are all important elements of being a good facilitator.

There are numerous trainings, readings, and learning communities/affinity groups available to help support this type of self-exploration and self-reflection.

At a minimum, you will want to have a base understanding of the following concepts, how they intersect with your identity and experience, and ways to mitigate them:

- Implicit bias or unconscious bias
- Social identity, power, and oppression
- Stereotypes

You will also want to familiarize yourself with some of the foundational terminology that can show up in conversations about race and racism, including:

- Equity vs. equality
- White supremacy culture
- Individual, institutional, systemic & structural racism
- Cultural humility vs. cultural competence
- Liberation

Additional racial equity readings, tools, and resources:

- Equity in the Center
- Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, Implicit Bias Module Series
- National Equity Project
- Othering & Belonging Institute

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- [Policy Link](#)
- [Race Forward](#)
- [Racial Equity Tools](#)
- [Strive Together Racial Equity leadership Competencies for Collaborative Improvement](#)

Understanding yourself is a necessary and critical first step to being able to engage with the job seekers coming through your program. Importantly, understanding yourself does not mean you need to know everything. Reflecting on your own race, implicit biases, stereotypes, and experiences with racism is not intended to make you an expert in any of these subjects. Nor should you feel like you have to be one. The goal is for you to familiarize yourself with these concepts in order to feel comfortable sharing your own story and vulnerabilities with participants.

2. Establish the enabling conditions

Acknowledge and solicit participant experiences
Invite participants to share their own experiences and stories related to the lesson content. There is as much value in discussing and learning from real life experiences as there is from learning new content. As you move through the curriculum, encourage participants to talk not only about how they created a resume, prepared for an interview, or developed their elevator pitch, but also what it felt like.

The job search process can be scary, overwhelming, and sometimes grueling. Acknowledging this, normalizing these emotions, and creating space to process individual experience helps ground this curriculum in reality.

We are all experts in our own lives and having the opportunity to share the wisdom we've gained with others can open the door to a new way of approaching, responding, or handling similar situations in the future. A good facilitator acknowledges the expertise in the room and makes space for it.

Create safety
Setting the right conditions to ensure participants actually feel safe discussing their racial experiences is one of the key jobs of a facilitator. Identity can be a really scary thing to discuss if folks are worried about how they might be perceived, are afraid of repercussions, or are concerned about being on the receiving end of any discrimination or harassment. Often we talk about setting "ground rules" or "group norms" as a way of creating safe spaces. These types of agreements are intended to serve as guardrails for respectful conversation and ensure everyone is committed to the same rules of engagement.

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In [racial healing circles](#)—a method in which small groups come together to share individual stories, listen deeply, and engage in generative conversation—"touchstones" are used to help create the conditions for impactful sharing. "Touchstones are an established set of mutually agreed-upon principles that guide how participants will treat and be with each other in 'deep dialogue.'"[15]

Below are example [touchstones](#)[16] that you might consider adapting for your own use:

- ***Be 100% present, extending and presuming welcome.*** Set aside the usual distractions of things undone from yesterday, things to do tomorrow. Bring all of yourself to the work. We all learn most effectively in spaces that welcome us. Welcome others to this place and this work, and presume that you are welcomed.

- ***Listen deeply.*** Listen intently to what is said; listen to the feelings beneath the words. Listen to yourself also. Strive to achieve a balance between listening and reflecting, speaking and acting.

- ***Always by invitation.*** It is never "share or die." You will be invited to share in pairs, small groups, and in the large group. The invitation is exactly that. You will determine the extent to which you want to participate in our discussions and activities.

- ***No fixing.*** Each of us is here to discover our own truths, to listen to our own inner teacher, to take our own inner journey. We are not here to set someone else straight, or to help right another's wrong, to "fix" or "correct" what we perceive as broken or incorrect in another member of the group.

- ***Suspend judgment.*** Set aside your judgments. By creating a space between judgments and reactions, we can listen to the other, and to ourselves, more fully. Thus, our perspectives, decisions, and actions are more informed.

- ***Identify assumptions.*** Our assumptions are usually invisible to us yet they undergird our worldview and thus our decisions and our actions. By identifying our assumptions, we can then set them aside and open our viewpoints to greater possibilities.

- ***Speak your truth.*** Say what is in your heart, trusting that your voice will be heard and your contribution respected. Your truth may be different from, even the opposite of, what another in the circle has said. Speaking your truth is not debating with, or correcting, or interpreting what another has said. Own your truth by speaking only for yourself, using "I" statements.

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- *Respect silence.* Silence is a rare gift in our busy world. After you or another has spoken, take time to reflect and fully listen, without immediately filling the space with words.

- *Maintain confidentiality.* Create a safe space by respecting the confidential nature and content of discussions held in the circle. What is said in the circle remains there.

- *When things get difficult, turn to wonder.* If you find yourself disagreeing with another, becoming judgmental, shutting down in defense, try turning to wonder: "I wonder what brought her to this place?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me?" "I wonder what he's feeling right now?"

Acknowledge trauma and address it appropriately

While there is no expectation that you, as a facilitator, should also serve as a trained mental health expert or therapist, it is important for you to be familiar with trauma, how it might show up for your participants, and ways you can effectively address it. Trauma-informed care isn't a clinical intervention but "a way of seeing and responding to people by providing safety, compassion, and mindfully avoiding retraumatization."[17]

As summarized and defined in the National Fund for Workforce Solutions' report, *"A Trauma-Informed Approach to Workforce,"*[18]

"Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

Trauma results from a variety of sources, including adverse childhood experiences, race-related or racial trauma, and secondary or vicarious trauma. There are other toxically stressful and traumatic experiences that can affect an individual: natural disasters, serious accidents, terrorist acts, and war and combat. Living in poverty and the constant state of deprivation is also a traumatic experience."

As a facilitator, becoming "trauma-informed" is a key first step to understanding and connecting with your participants. This means knowing the definition of trauma, understanding how it affects the brain, and what signs to look for in participant behavior.

The simple act of acknowledging that trauma exists can be helpful, as can creating space in the classroom to process shared trauma (e.g., a neighborhood shooting, natural disaster, race-related experiences, etc.). Engaging in some restorative, human-centered, resiliency-building practices can also support the development of a safe space. For example, building in time for breaks or downtime between heavy lesson topics; incorporating short meditation or breathing techniques into the schedule; allowing participants to unload what's on their minds, either verbally or in writing, at the start of each class as a centering activity; playing calming music; or providing fidget toys to engage the tactile senses.

CURRICULUM GOALS/OBJECTIVES

This curriculum is designed to build **confidence** and **empower** job seekers to:

- Recognize and speak to their executive function, workplace navigation, and technical skills
- Advocate for themselves, particularly in situations where they have traditionally felt powerless
- Make career decisions/choices that allow them to show up as their authentic selves

- Value the full range of skills they bring to the labor market, particularly those skills that are not recognized in a labor market rooted in white supremacy
- Identify and center their own career goals and overcome obstacles to achieving those goals
- Recognize they have assets and networks that can be used in pursuit of their career goals
- Navigate the job search process

Job seekers will have the opportunity to **practice**:

- Exploring the ways in which (in)equity impacts the job search process
- Identifying and naming their own skills, values, interests and how those connect to career opportunities
- Identifying and using their executive function and workplace navigation skills
- Using the goal attainment process to achieve specific, self-identified milestones
- The steps of the job search process

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ORIENTATION TO THE CURRICULUM

The Career Readiness Curriculum is an open-source resource that is built upon existing job readiness curricula and field expertise. We encourage you to utilize and adapt this curriculum as needed, while acknowledging and crediting the contributions of previous versions. Whether you choose to implement the entire curriculum or selectively incorporate specific lessons into your existing program, this curriculum offers comprehensive instruction for both group/classroom delivery and individual or small group coaching sessions.

Please feel empowered to iterate on the curriculum based on the unique needs and context of your participants. We understand that every learner and program is different, and we encourage you to tailor the material to create a meaningful and relevant experience for job seekers. We value your expertise and recognize the importance of adapting the curriculum to maximize its impact.

In addition to group/classroom instruction, this curriculum places a strong emphasis on individual or small group coaching sessions. These coaching sessions provide an invaluable opportunity for personalized support, skill development, and goal-setting. By incorporating coaching techniques, you can foster a deeper understanding and application of the material, enabling job seekers to navigate the challenges of the job market with confidence.

As a facilitator, we want to ensure that you have all the support you need to effectively implement this curriculum. In the introduction and appendices of the curriculum, you will find valuable facilitation tips and resources that will guide you through the delivery of each lesson. These resources are designed to enhance your facilitation skills, provide insights into best practices, and offer practical techniques to engage job seekers. We encourage you to explore these sections as they will serve as your go-to references for facilitating impactful sessions.

Please note that certain lessons within this curriculum may require digital access, such as computer labs, email accounts, and cloud storage. We understand that not all participants may have immediate access to these resources, and we encourage facilitators to explore alternative solutions or accommodations to ensure inclusivity and equal participation. It is important to be mindful of the varying digital literacy and access levels among job seekers and adapt the curriculum accordingly to ensure everyone can fully engage in the learning process.

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LESSON COMPONENTS

The lesson components are carefully designed to support the facilitator in delivering effective and impactful instruction that meets the learning objectives of the curriculum.

Title

The title of each lesson reflects its main focus. For example, "Creating a Vision Board" or "Identifying Our Executive Skills."

Topic

Each lesson falls into one of the following topic areas:

- *Core Lessons* - Understanding the perceptions, assumptions and identities involved in the job search.

  Facilitator Note - These core lessons form the essence of this curriculum and provide the necessary groundwork to orient job seekers to the unique aspects of the curriculum. This includes topics such as integrating executive function and workplace navigation skills, the goal attainment process, and discussions on equity. While facilitators have the flexibility to select relevant lessons from topics 2-5 based on participants' needs and sequence them as desired, we recommend following the outlined facilitation approach for each lesson in Topic 1.

- *All About You* - Discovering personal interests, skills, and values.
- *Get Ready* - Crafting resumes, cover letters, and personal pitches.
- *The Search* - Searching and applying for jobs.
- *Get the Job* - Mastering the art of the interview to land the job.

Lessons

Each lesson is numbered sequentially to indicate its place in the curriculum. However, facilitators are welcome to conduct lessons in any order they prefer to meet the needs of their participants. Be mindful of the prerequisite lessons listed at the beginning of each lesson. These lessons are connected and their sequencing will be important.

Objectives

The objectives of each lesson state what participants will be able to do or understand by the end of the lesson.

Prerequisite Lessons

Any lessons in the curriculum that build upon or require knowledge or skills from previous lessons, will be identified as prerequisite lessons. This helps ensure that participants progress in a logical and sequential manner through the curriculum, building on knowledge and skills as they go along.

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Workplace Navigation Skills

Each lesson explicitly highlights the executive function and workplace navigation skills that will be practiced in the lesson.

Facilitator Note

In Topic 1, Lesson 13 of the curriculum, we introduce the *Workplace Navigation Skills Reflection Checklist,* a valuable resource to support job seekers in identifying and reflecting on their workplace navigation and executive function skills. To ensure its effectiveness, we recommend regularly revisiting this checklist throughout your training program. After facilitating a lesson, encourage participants to identify the workplace navigation skills they used during the class and record them on the checklist. Additionally, prompt them to identify and record at least two other skills they used in other areas of their life that week. By checking in with this topic regularly, you will help job seekers become more comfortable discussing their workplace navigation skills, which will be crucial in their interactions with future employers.

Time

Each lesson can take anywhere from 30-90 minutes depending on the specific topic and activities included. The time allocation may be adjusted based on the needs of the participants and the facilitator's discretion.

Methodology

The curriculum utilizes an interactive and participatory approach to engage adult learners. It includes a combination of small and large group discussions, activities, role-plays, and individual reflection exercises that promote active learning and application of skills in real-world scenarios.

Facilitator Pre-work

Before delivering the lesson, the facilitator is encouraged to review the lesson plan and familiarize themselves with the content and activities. They may also need to review readings and prepare any necessary materials to enhance the learning experience.

Materials

The curriculum provides a list of materials that may be required for each lesson, such as a whiteboard or flip chart, markers, pens, sticky notes, index cards, and any other relevant supplies. Additionally, the facilitator will need access to a computer(s) or projector for multimedia presentations (videos, Powerpoint presentations, etc).

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Handouts

The curriculum includes handouts that are designed to support the learning process. These may include worksheets, checklists, templates, and other resources that participants can use to practice and apply the skills learned in the lesson. The facilitator should print or prepare these handouts in advance and distribute them as needed during the lesson.

Facilitator Note: In Topic 1, Lessons 2-4, and Topic 2, Lessons 10-11 of our curriculum, we introduce a range of goal attainment tools designed to assist job seekers in visioning, identifying, clarifying, and reviewing their goals. We highly recommend integrating these tools into your training program on a regular basis. By revisiting them, you will enable job seekers to break down their long-term goals into manageable short-term goals and develop effective action plans to achieve them. It is important to understand that goal attainment is a cyclical process, and incorporating these tools throughout your job readiness training program will provide continuous support for job seekers in their journey to attaining their goals.

Facilitation Tips

Most lessons include a Facilitation Tips section that provides you with valuable insights and strategies to optimize the delivery of the lesson.

These tips are designed to help you create an engaging and interactive learning environment, manage group dynamics, and adapt the material to meet the specific needs of your participants.

Coaching Questions

Coaching Questions serve as powerful tools to stimulate critical thinking, self-reflection, and active participation among job seekers. These thought-provoking questions are strategically integrated into the curriculum to encourage deep exploration of key concepts, personal experiences, and individual goals. Utilize these coaching questions during one-on-one or small group coaching sessions to foster meaningful conversations and empower participants to discover their own insights and solutions.

Coaching Tools & Exercises

The Coaching Tools & Exercises section provides you with a collection of practical resources designed to support the skill development and application of key concepts. These tools and exercises are carefully crafted to support participants' strengthening and practice of executive function and workplace navigation skills. Incorporate these tools and exercises into your one-on-one or small group coaching sessions to offer hands-on learning experiences and promote active skill development.

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Endnotes

1 Primary research studies grounding our work:

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- Shechtman, N., Yarnall, L., Stites, R., & Cheng, B. (2016). Empowering adults to thrive at work: Personal success skills for 21st century jobs. A report on promising research and practice. Chicago, IL: Joyce Foundation.

- Center for Applied Behavioral Science (2018). The Future of Executive-Skills Coaching and Behavioral Science in Programs that Serve Teens and Young Adults. New York, NY: MDRC.

2 Babcock, E. (2018). Harnessing the Power of High Expectations: Using Brain Science to Coach for Breakthrough Outcomes. Boston, MA: Economic Mobility Pathways.

3 Babcock, E. (2014). Using Brain Science to Design New Pathways Out of Poverty. Boston, MA: Crittenton Women's Union.

4 Guare, R., Dawson, P., & Guare, C. (2017). Executive Skills Coaching with Adults Affected by Conditions of Poverty and Stress. Fort Collins, CO: Tua-Path LLC.

5 Pavetti, L. (2018). Goal, Plan, Do, Review and Revise: An Executive Function-Informed Goal Achievement Framework for Use in Human Service Programs. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

6 The Prosperity Agenda (2016). Career and Life Coaching Training Toolkit. Seattle, WA: The Prosperity Agenda.

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8 Ruiz de Luzuriaga, N. (2015). Coaching For Economic Mobility. Boston, MA: Crittenton Women's Union.

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10 Elmen-Gruys, K. (2014). Properly Attired, Hired, or Fired: Aesthetic Labor and Social Inequality. UCLA. ProQuest ID: ElmenGruys_ucla_0031D_13099. Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m5hh80dm. Retrieved from Properly Attired, Hired, or Fired: Aesthetic Labor and Social Inequality

11 Chaganti, Sarah. "Being professional, following rules": Culture and Inequality in Job Readiness Training. A Dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University. 2018.

12 DiAngelo, Robin J. White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism. Boston: Beacon Press, 2018. P. 33.

13 Racial Equity Tools Glossary

14 McCluney, Courtney L., Kathrina Robotham, Serenity Lee, Richard Smith, and Myles Durkee. "The Costs of Code-Switching." Harvard Business Review. November 15, 2019.

15 Gray, Aysa. The Bias of 'Professionalism' Standards (2019).

16 Coming to the Table website. Touchstones

17 These Touchstones are adapted from ideas, concepts, and practices used in a Circle of Trust. Another resource is Visions, Inc. This version was initially developed for Coming to the Table by Ann Holmes Redding, Ph.D. & Pat Russell, Psy. D., and has been updated to reflect experience in their usage. Touchstones

18 Szemborski, L. (2020). Trauma-informed care: Best practices for EAPs. Journal of Employee Assistance.

19 Choitz, Vickie and Stacy Wagner. 2021. "A Trauma-Informed Approach to Workforce: An Introductory Guide for Employers and Workforce Development Organizations." National Fund for Workforce Solutions. p.5.