



Next Generation Workers and Career Navigation:

How Employers Can Help Young People Navigate Their Careers

Acknowledgements

The Britebound™ Center for Career Navigation at JFF is deeply appreciative of the employers that joined and were active, engaged members of our Next Generation Employer Working Group in 2025 and 2026. They include Best Buy, UpWork, Delta Air Lines, YMCA, University of Alabama—Medicine, M&T Bank, and Portland General Electric. Together, they employ more than half a million Americans, and we are thankful for their commitment and partnership in supporting next-generation workers.



America's Next Generation of Workers

There are 70 million Gen Z Americans—young people born between 1997 and 2012—and by 2030, they will make up 30% of the U.S. workforce. Another 50 million Generation Alphas are right behind them. Yet the labor market they are entering faces evolving headwinds. Consider that the unemployment rate among 16-24 year-olds was more than double the overall unemployment rate, rising sharply from just two years earlier.¹ A World Economic Forum report shows that entry-level job postings in the United States have declined by 29% since January 2024, hindering young workers trying to on-ramp into jobs and careers.² Next-generation workers are regularly told to cultivate in-demand, industry-aligned skills, but face an ever-growing number of degree, certification, and credential programs with little real-time information about the ROI and opportunities available to them if they pursue one of these programs. Finally, the current and future impact of AI on work and careers looms large, and many questions remain.

In short, next-generation workers are navigating education and career pathway decisions in a dynamic and at times challenging landscape. Employers have the power to be partners in working with next-generation talent to navigate these pathway decisions and the complex labor market they are entering. Indeed, as they prepare to handle their own worker demographic shifts—more than 4 million Baby Boomers will reach retirement age each year between 2024 and 2027—and reimagine and reconfigure jobs in the AI era, employers must work with intention to help new workers navigate their careers.³



From November 2025 to March 2026, The Britebound Center for Career Navigation at Jobs for the Future (JFF) was proud to facilitate a Next Generation Employer Working Group with leading companies from industries including health care, transportation, energy, financial services, community wellness and services, and retail. Through this work, we identified key promising practices, persistent challenges that merit further solution-based thinking, and strategies to scale and sustain the important work of helping the next generation of American workers navigate pathways into quality jobs.



Promising Practices

Overall, employers are adopting a wide range of practices to help next-generation talent learn about and navigate career pathways within their companies and industries. The majority of Next Generation working group members reported that within the last five years, their companies have used practices including career fairs, internships, and other work-based learning (WBL), and providing guest speakers to education and training programs. A minority also reported using marketing and communications strategies designed to help people learn about and navigate careers in their company and industry.

Employers identified the following five promising practices as especially helpful in supporting next-generation workers in learning about, navigating, and making career pathway decisions early in their professional journeys.

1. Start exposure early to generate excitement about later opportunities.

Companies reported exploring ways to create internships and WBL for young people still in high school and to build successful internship programs targeting college students, all of which provide young people with experience and perspective that can help them make career pathway decisions. Partnerships with community organizations—including those serving students as young as elementary and middle school—were also identified as ways to help spark interest in careers.



PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

UAB Medicine

UAB Medicine is the largest employer in Alabama. To build next generation talent, UAB Medicine takes a “start early” approach. Through K-12 school partnerships, fun and interactive outreach events in the community, and collaboration with local organizations that work with young people, this leading employer is nurturing interest in health care careers among the region’s youngest residents and future workers.



2. Highlight the range of occupations within an industry.

Companies across nearly all industry sectors said that young people are often unaware of different types of roles and opportunities. Strategies to increase awareness of specific occupations and roles are critical to help young people with broad interests identify and pursue these pathways.



PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Upwork

More than half of Gen Z workers have engaged in freelance work at some point and some research predicts that freelancing will occupy 50% of the U.S. workforce by 2027. As a platform that connects independent freelancers with businesses of all sizes, Upwork conducts research and partners with nonprofits to help next-gen workers identify and build in-demand skills. By enabling young workers to successfully navigate self-employment and skill development, Upwork is building an entrepreneurial path across dozens of industries and supporting economic opportunity.



PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Portland General Electric (PGE)

Portland General Electric (PGE) employs thousands of Oregonians in a diverse array of jobs, yet many young people in the state are unfamiliar with the many career opportunities in the energy sector. That is a part of the reason why in 2022, PGE created the Oregon Clean Energy Workforce Coalition and is driving innovative strategies to help young people explore and navigate towards high-quality clean energy jobs right in their own backyard. These innovative strategies include building the capacity of K-12 teachers to help young people engage with energy sector careers and providing easy, online access to skills training that helps next generation workers prepare for and navigate jobs in this sector.



3. WBL provides directional guidance and real-time information to inform decisions about education, skills training, and certification options.

Companies shared that WBL experiences offer exposure, inspiration, and motivation to help next-generation workers choose a pathway, as well as nuanced information about certification or training programs highly valued by employers.



PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

M&T Bank

M&T Bank is committed to helping early career workers learn about and successfully navigate careers within the financial services industry, and one of their signature strategies is a robust internship program. M&T Bank works closely with community and education partners to connect and welcome these early career workers into internships. By designing these internships to include exposure to many facets of the industry and offering opportunities to build networks and receive mentorship, M&T internships are a powerful asset in an individual's career navigation toolkit.

4. Embrace intentional strategies to bolster durable skills.

Like all people navigating careers, young workers need to have a sense of agency and initiative to navigate their career journeys and make informed decisions. Companies reported that young workers often need support in developing these skills; practices such as mentorship and integrating durable skills training into occupational skills training can be effective approaches. With the knowledge and confidence gained from durable skills, young workers may seek out information about different upskilling opportunities, proactively build professional networks and social capital as a part of their career navigation efforts, and gain the interpersonal and communication skills necessary to leverage networks and opportunities as they choose a career pathway.



PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

YMCA

YMCA is one of the nation's largest employers of young people, as next generation workers fill roles in summer camps, recreation, aquatics, and more. Many of these young workers will use their YMCA jobs as a first step in a longer career journey within and beyond the YMCA. At regional associations such as the YMCA of Greater Seattle, the team values equipping young workers with durable skills and experiences that can help them navigate future education and career decisions, empowering them to build a pathway that reflects their strengths, values, and personal vision of a rewarding professional life.



PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Best Buy

Best Buy is committed to supporting the next generation of workers as they explore and prepare for the careers of the future through the company's social impact work. To strengthen today's workforce and prepare for tomorrow's, the company provides opportunities for young people to learn critical job skills through initiatives including Best Buy Teen Tech Centers, Geek Squad Academy and career pathways programming. These initiatives help build pathways through offerings such as career panels, employer site visits, formal mentorship, and technology credentialing, equipping young people with the skills, knowledge, and access for the tech-enabled careers of the future.



5. Forge and sustain deep, multi-faceted partnerships to jumpstart next generation worker engagement in careers and maximize employer impact.

Members of the Next Generation working group shared that deep partnerships with education and training institutions, community-based workforce organizations, and other key stakeholders were significantly more effective than one-off activities intended to reach early-career workers, such as attending a career fair. These partnerships were characterized by their multifaceted nature that included several opportunities for interaction and networking. In addition, they were often significantly place- and community-based and, in some cases, represented a merging of talent pipelines and philanthropic initiatives.



PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Delta Air Lines

For 100 years, Delta Air Lines has been on a mission to connect people, not only to places, but also to opportunities and resources that will help them thrive. Through deep and multi-faceted partnerships with K-12 schools, colleges, and community-based organizations, Delta supports pathways for students and young people to explore careers, including exposure to the many possibilities within the aviation industry. Delta is also committed to development for early-career and frontline employees through upskilling partnerships that offer training, online education, and experiential learning. This future-focused approach empowers employees to build long-term careers at Delta while giving back to the communities where they live, work, and serve.



Challenges We Still Need to Solve

Next Generation working group members helped to surface some persistent, complex, and challenging issues that merit further attention and solutions-focused conversations.

These include:

Equipping mid-level managers and leadership with the capacity, knowledge, and skills they need to be effective partners.

Some companies reported a strong sense of executive vision and leadership around next-generation talent and career navigation among young workers. However, others reported challenges in giving mid-level managers and leaders the time and bandwidth for this work, and a need for more intentional supports and training, especially in contexts of changing workforce generational demographics. Opportunities to explore include dedicated training on this topic for mid-level managers and leaders, and structuring supervisory and manager role(s) with a more explicit focus on performance objectives related to next generation talent development.

Identifying employer-supported early career navigation with limited entry-level opportunities.

Some companies and industries reported a history of limited entry-level roles, making it challenging to think about how these employers can be partners in supporting career navigation. Opportunities to explore include industry-cluster approaches at the local or state level that intentionally clarify cross-industry linkages and pathways for young people, and piloting internal development strategies, such as apprenticeships.





Scale & Sustainability

Throughout the work of the Next Generation working group, dialogue regularly returned to the importance of scaling and sustaining this work to ensure that promising practices—which may be flourishing under the championship of a particular leader or thriving at just one company location among hundreds—reach and impact more young people. Strategies to advance scale and sustainability include:

- **Public and private sector investment** in early exposure and exploration activities can spark interest in young people, motivating them to navigate through and toward education and career pathways in diverse industries.
- **Prioritizing deep, institutional, and multi-faceted partnerships** that can persist over time as a central component of next-generation talent strategies, and further, institutionalizing and sharing out the framework for these partnerships across geographies and business units.
- **Proactively, intentionally, and consistently engaging leadership around the next generation talent pipeline** and working to build consensus around a strategy where all business units and levels of staff have both ownership and a sense of empowerment to contribute to a company's next-generation talent strategy.



Endnotes

1. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Unemployment Rate - 16-24 Yrs. [LNS14024887], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LNS14024887>, March 27, 2026.
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3. Konish, Lorie. 2024. "As Baby Boomers Hit 'peak 65' This Year, What the Retirement Age Should Be Is up for Debate." CNBC. February 8, 2024. <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/02/08/baby-boomers-hit-peak-65-in-2024-why-retirement-age-is-in-question.html>.

