



Deeper Understanding of Employer Partnerships: *Exploring Best Practices in the Field*

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NATIONAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT COALITION

Core Practice Brief

February 2023

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Overview and Purpose of Project	/ 3
Literature Review Key Takeaways	/ 4
Focus Groups	/ 5
LOS ANGELES	/ 6
Employer Focus Group	/ 6
Service Providers Focus Group	/ 8
Youth Focus Group	/ 11
NEW ORLEANS	/ 14
Employer Focus Group	/ 14
Service Providers Focus Group	/ 17
Youth Focus Group	/ 19
Findings	/ 22
Key takeaways and implications	/ 22
Implications for Action & Next Steps	/ 25

About the National Youth Employment Coalition

For more than 40 years, the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) has worked toward an America in which all young people are supported and prepared to become thriving members of our economy and society, regardless of their race, gender, ability, geography, or means. Annually, we reach hundreds of organizations that work with thousands of young people across the country. These community-based organizations, state agencies, and local government organizations focus on empowering young people to transition to postsecondary education and employment. Since its inception, NYEC has strengthened the field of youth workforce development at local and state levels, and has influenced dozens of pieces of federal legislation related to underserved youth and young adults. Learn more at www.nyec.org



Overview and Purpose of Project

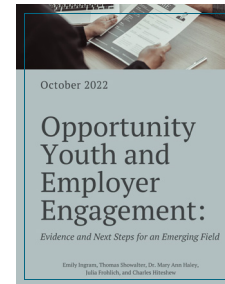
With major support from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the National Youth Employment Coalition is exploring strategies to define and strengthen the state of employer engagement on behalf of 16-24-year-olds who are neither in school nor working (a group we will refer to as “Opportunity Talent,” or OT). This effort involves the production of two reports: (1) a literature review and findings concerning effective practices around opportunity youth employer engagement, published in October 2022, and (2) this Core Practice Brief, which is based on an expansion of our literature review with additional findings from focus groups comprised of employers, providers, youth and young adults in New Orleans and Los Angeles, cities where the Hilton Foundation is focusing its attention. NYEC held a national workshop on February 16, 2023 to share results with over 100 participants. We are deeply grateful to the Foundation for its support and for the time and talents of the individuals who shared their wisdom and experiences with us. We hope that this work will help leaders in these communities and others around the nation to establish policies and approaches that will strengthen hiring, retention, and advancement for Opportunity Talent.

As potential next steps, NYEC will identify and recruit members for Steering Committees in New Orleans and Los Angeles, facilitated by NYEC staff working in close partnership with an adult chair and a youth chair; as well as employer leadership in both the healthcare and the hotel and hospitality industries; service providers that work with OT; and OT themselves. Membership will total 6-8 participants and the committees’ charge will be to take the Core Practice Brief and customize a pilot approach building on the assets and opportunities in each city. We anticipate that the final pilot approaches will be completed in June and ready for implementation later in the summer.

Literature Review Key Takeaways

NYEC's 2022 report, *Employer Engagement and Opportunity Youth: Evidence and Next Steps for an Emerging Field*, reviewed and examined available literature on issues and strategies to build effective connections with employers for the purpose of hiring, placing, and retaining Opportunity Talent. Our goal was to examine past research, case studies, toolkits, and other evidence from the field with an eye toward developing an evidence-based approach to optimizing and expanding employer engagement in communities across the country.

Key findings from this report include:



In general: While there are some commonalities across workforce programs, employer engagement strategies are characterized by a lack of rigorous and detailed study of evidence-based approaches.

Current state and opportunities for improvement, for...

...YOUTH:

- For workplace success, youth need both soft skills (punctuality, dependability, ability to follow instructions) and executive skills (social awareness, problem-solving, collaboration)
- Opportunity Talent face many of the same challenges as other youth but may also suffer additional barriers related to mental health, housing instability, justice involvement, and access to transportation and childcare.

...SERVICE PROVIDERS:

- Community Based Organizations (CBOs) attempt to align the needs of Opportunity Talent and employers, while juggling funder incentives and more immediate placement approaches
- Training organizations focus primarily on hard skills, and secondary schools rarely provide instruction in soft and/or executive skills.

- CBOs should communicate clear expectations for job placement, including sectors and job quality indicators (benefits, stable hours, advancement opportunities, belonging).
- Workforce systems should develop more longitudinal data about young adults' duration in employment, wages, and satisfaction.
- Understanding the evolving needs of employers is critical to the successful placement of OT.

...EMPLOYERS:

- Employers vary greatly in the skills, experiences, and credentials they seek from their employees.
- Employers increasingly seek basic literacy, soft skills, and executive skills as needs for new hires.
- Employers should take into consideration approaches to diversity, equity, and inclusion (several are referenced in the lit review).

- Employers should actively encourage secondary education institutions (both middle and high schools) to provide instruction in soft and executive skills.

...EMPLOYERS & PROVIDERS:

- CBOs and employers can and should take steps to center the voices of OY (Opportunity Youth).
- CBOs and employers should establish as much continuity as possible in staffing, shared files, and shared data.
- CBOs, employers, and school systems should work together to strengthen teaching in soft skills and incorporating employment information and trends over the arc of a young person's development.
- CBOs and employers should engage young leaders and employees to improve their experience of employment programs and workplaces.



Focus Groups

Having documented the best available practices and identified related recommendations for strengthening employer engagement for Opportunity Talent, our next step was to test our findings. To this end, NYEC worked with leaders in two cities: New Orleans and Los Angeles, where we assembled three stakeholder groups:

- **Employers, including representatives from the hotel and hospitality and healthcare sectors**
- **Youth training practitioners**
- **Young people**

Facilitators asked each focus group to reflect on the findings of the literature review, and to respond to a series of questions that invited them to expand on our work based on their own experiences, and to offer their thoughts for strengthening employer engagement to more effectively source, hire, retain and advance Opportunity Talent.

In this section, we summarize the clarifying questions posed to focus group members in each city and share examples of their responses.

Note: Pull-quotes throughout this section are direct or paraphrased statements from focus group participants.



FOCUS GROUPS: Los Angeles

Employer Focus Group

Essential Questions

1. What does employer engagement mean for your work?
2. What resources have you relied on as you have learned more about it?
3. What kind of data do you use? What kind of data would you like to have?
4. What are your aspirations for employer engagement?
5. What are examples of great employer practices in your community?

Although their industries differ considerably, representatives from hospitality and health care sectors shared the belief that **building deep relationships** from the outset with training organizations and individuals—a **continuum** from sourcing, recruiting, onboarding, and network-building—was key to successful hiring. But employers also recognized that **having recruiters with the knowledge, capacity, and skill to build and maintain this continuum is challenging and expensive**. And the continuum shouldn't just begin with the hiring process. It **must also include secondary school engagement**, e.g., with speakers, mentors, industry visits, industry-based classes, summer internships and full-time employment. **Employers must be active at each of these levels** to achieve true engagement. The notion of constantly back-engineering from the evolving nature of jobs and entire sectors to the service providers/trainers and schools themselves loomed large and not altogether present in preparing opportunity youth for the world of work.

Employers often rely on **traditional resources for recruitment**, including LinkedIn and Glassdoor, as well as associations like **chambers of commerce**. Some work closely with the **public workforce system** as well as with **networks of OT providers** and other social services agencies, e.g., mental health. Others mentioned the importance of **dedicated staff** focused on OT recruitment.

“We have to understand the importance and value proposition of OT when they are trained, supported, and show opportunities for growth and advancement.”

Los Angeles Focus Group: Employers

Hotel and Hospitality

- **Irina Boquiren**
Retail Supervisor, Starbucks
- **Stacy Gardner**
Recruiter, Starbucks
- **Carlos Lopez**
Recruiter TLA, Starbucks
- **Beth Ryan**
Executive Director,
Stepping Up LA
- **James Staten, Jr.**
Digital Media Executive,
Yes2Jobs
- **Michelle Weingott**
Senior Recruitment
Manager, Hilton

Health Care

- **Ever Hillebrandt**
Senior Manager for
Workforce Development,
Unite LA
- **Ilia Lopez**
Senior Manager for
Inclusion and Community
Partnerships, Unite LA
- **Juan Mendez**
Supervisor, Providence
Health
- **Jessica Ricker**
Training Store Manager RX,
CVS

Participants indicated that they often use **employment data** available through local workforce agencies, as well as their own **surveys**. Several participants mentioned that they provide **training and workshops to OT**, and Hilton Hotels is in the process of developing and implementing a formal pathway program for OT. Most agreed that **success with OT is dependent on adopting new mindsets** to ensure that employers can tap the resources and innovation that these young people possess while also ensuring that they receive the support they need to sustain and enhance their employment prospects. It is also important for employers to understand that, while OT's background and circumstances might have hindered their acquisition of soft and executive skills, these experiences have also contributed to their resilience and potential strengths as employees. In either case, it is critical for all sectors to acknowledge that these skills must be formally taught and reinforced at every juncture of youth development and within OT training programs.

Employers mentioned several examples of positive engagement, including efforts by Hilton Hotels, the Caesar Chavez Foundation, and LA's Ready to Succeed, but all acknowledged there was too much fragmentation. A possible solution would be for a central organization to create a **clearinghouse that researches and features the best evidence-aligned resources and opportunities, including a searchable database for OT**, so that individual employers don't have to do so much sifting themselves.

Some companies also **incentivize their employees to support OT** in prepping for the world of work, making it a part of their corporate culture and building pride around it. Employers also believed it was important to **develop an appreciation for prior existing skills** and lived experiences—childcare, counselor, social media influencer—when it comes to recruiting and vetting OT candidates.

"My aspiration for employer engagement is to convey up and down the hierarchy in my large company the true value of OT when given the chance, the support, and the guidance. This would not only ensure better retention, but it would also give a lot of my fellow employees a greater sense of purpose and pride in our work."

Additional Deeper Dive Questions

In addition to the essential questions, the employer focus group members were asked their thoughts on several additional issues. Some of these questions included:

6. What has been your experience with youth-serving or job-training organizations?
7. What has worked, or not, within these relationships?
8. What has been your experience with employing opportunity youth?
9. What do you wish that youth-serving organizations did differently or better?
10. What have been the biggest opportunities or challenges about employing them?
11. What ideas for your company/organization do you have for improving recruitment and retention of OY?

In general, **employers want to connect with youth-serving organizations, workforce trainers, and schools** and have had some success in doing so. However, staff in these organizations are often overworked and stretched too thin. So, **youth-serving organizations can't do this work alone**. There must be a full range of partners—schools, social services agencies, employers—adopting a **case management mentality** and working together to promote OT success.

Employers firmly believe, with the right support, that OT have the potential to be innovative, creative, and resilient employees, who make positive contributions to corporate climates and bottom lines. But it's also important to be sensitive to the challenges they face, taking steps to address their concerns through supports like flexible scheduling and transportation subsidies. Employers should also understand and address existing **workplace biases** that could work against OT's success, including shining a light on the "hidden rules" of the modern-day workplace.

All employers agree that **we need a better way to track OT from hiring through retention, to advancement**, for at least the first year of employment, e.g., by adding an OT column to corporate ATS (Applicant Tracking Systems). It's also important to find a way to measure barriers, i.e., what is keeping youth from staying on the job or applying in the first place. And going back to the clearinghouse notion, **employers strongly support a system that could identify and source OT by interest, skills, and training**. But there is also a recognition that, at the moment, sufficient funding may not be available.

"We must adopt the notion of shared case management so that when working with youth, they get the same message of support and accountability."

Service Providers Focus Group

Essential Questions

1. What does Employer Engagement mean to you?
2. What resources have proven most helpful with employer engagement?
3. What are some examples of best practices and practitioners?
4. What resources do you need?
5. What youth training supports are most important?
6. What roles should youth play?
7. What are some examples of strong employer engagement?
8. What hasn't worked?
9. What can employers do better?
10. What do you tell employers about your Opportunity Talent?

Los Angeles Focus Group: Service Providers

- **Marialuisa Ferro**
Director of Programs, LA Tech
- **Mary Jo Ramirez**
Executive Director, California Family Life Center
- **Beth Ryan**
Executive Director, Stepping Forward LA
- **Robert Sainz**
Executive Director, New Ways to Work

Los Angeles service providers understand that employer engagement involves several essential aspects, including **developing a key set of business leaders** who are **sensitive to the needs of OT**; willing to **check in regularly about evolving jobs** and needs; and work with providers to ensure that **training programs can lead to career pathways**. Often, providers find that the most engaged employers are those whose leaders—both in executive and talent acquisition positions—have **experience with the issues confronting OT**, and that these individuals can be persuasive with other employer leaders to spread the word about the value of OT. Providers also understand and appreciate that companies are in business to succeed, and the more youth-serving organizations can meet employers' needs for talent, the more they can create opportunities for their young clients.

Los Angeles service providers take advantage of a **variety of resources to support their employer** engagement work, including the [Foundation for California Community Colleges](#), for its ability to work closely with employers to understand the corporate and economic needs and then identify pathways with relevant trainings and courses to get there. [New Ways To Work](#) is also a valuable resource for updated research on Opportunity Youth. Further, national organizations representing urban areas, including [US Conference of Mayors](#) and the [National League of Cities](#), provide useful information, as does the research group [Chapin Hall](#) and [Measure of America](#), a key resource that can easily be customized for use in local counties and specific communities. In addition to the organizations and associations, meeting regularly with local and **regional industry sector groups** is useful for providers in identifying trends and opportunities as well as building trust, relationships, and pathways over time.

In terms of effective practice and high-quality practitioners, several providers referenced the [Youth Ecology Corps](#), designed by News Ways to Work and the CA Family Life Center, which immerses a cohort of OT in workforce issues around water quality and is jointly funded by employers, the LA workforce board, and community colleges. Other local efforts touted include [Target Local Hire](#) and [Hire LA's Youth](#), which place underserved youth in city jobs, and [LA Rise](#), which has been effective at organizing social enterprise employees to hire Opportunity Youth with subsidies from the city. National organizations and programs were also referenced, including [iFoster](#), [YouthBuild](#) and [Job Corps](#).

All providers value quality data on sector growth and available jobs, which are generally available but often require sifting through various reports and data. The [LA Economic Development Corporation](#) (LAEDC) is a great source with an annual jobs

"When a service provider identifies one great advocate, leverage that relationship to contact and engage more like-minded employers."

"Internships are critical for foster youth, 75% of whom age out of the system with no work experience."

"We need ways to make current employment data available to OT providers in ways that they can understand and act on them."

report for youth, as is the [Center for Labor Markets and Policy](#), but these types of resources need to be re-packaged and shared with OT providers in digestible and usable formats. Providers also referenced several tools for youth training, including [Career Cruising](#), which helps identify interests and learning styles, and promotes resume building before connecting youth to job opportunities; **Achieving Your Potential**, which is valuable for assessing resiliency in young job seekers; **True Colors**, for identifying youth interests and opportunities; and [VidCruiter](#), which prepares youth for interviews and then provides a method to review and improve presentation.

Interestingly, **providers didn't prioritize youth voices** as part of their employer engagement strategies, nor was there much attention given to youth roles in discovering and developing their own pathways. This suggests an opportunity to build new provider capacity, perhaps through the **establishment of Opportunity Talent Ambassadors**, i.e., young people with training and experience who could help plan and design relevant trainings and supports.

Providers lifted up several employers for their creativity and commitment in hiring OT. For example, [Deckers](#), a lifestyle footwear company in Riverside, produces Uggs and, working with CA Family Life Center, developed a **"crew leader" concept which allows provider staff to study the precise roles, tasks and duties required of various positions and then develop training for OT**. Deckers has developed its own \$50,000 grant to support and advance this work. This approach is also championed by [Generation USA](#), a national organization that uses this same technique at scale in multiple companies across the nation. In addition, for many years the [City of Los Angeles](#) has been an exemplar of Opportunity Youth program development, service, and placement.

Providers struggle in several areas. For example, there are **challenges in reaching out to OT**, and once they're recruited, significant additional **documentation** about status, income, etc. is often required before services can be provided (much of this is due to federal requirements associated with the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act). Similarly, some providers stated that local workforce boards often have **policies and procedures that are not user-friendly for OT** and other clients. Some providers complained that employers don't work with local service providers that could enable OT to access needed educational and social services, and others chafed against a "blame the victim" mentality held by some employers.

"There is a bit of a 'hire and done' mentality across the board."

In terms of things that employers can do better, **all providers urged business partners to help them track hiring, retention, and advancement over time**. Even more challenging is tracking advancement regarding enhanced responsibilities, position change, and wage

growth. This type of information could not only increase opportunities but could also help providers gauge success and refine practice. [UNITE-LA](#) was again referenced for its effort to generate employer engagement and job sourcing centrally, but work must be undertaken to make sure the benefits are equitably distributed across the host of providers.

Providers work hard to demonstrate the value of their Opportunity Talent to employers, stressing how much they have overcome and grown, and as a result they are resilient, resourceful, and talented. **Providers also urge employers to be sensitive to the trauma many OT have faced** and to understand and forgive work history and other indicators of challenge. Bottom line, providers ask employers to give OT a chance; give them support and then watch them grow.

“These young people have been through challenges and navigated obstacles that many employers can only imagine.”

Youth Focus Group

Essential Questions

1. How did you get your jobs, and how did you hear about them?
2. Do you think your friends know about youth employment programs in your area?
3. How many of you did any job training? What was it like?
4. What could improve the process of finding out about opportunities in your city?
5. Did the program identify your skills and interests well?
6. Do you think this helped with matching you with a job?
7. Once on the job did you receive a formal orientation or other training?
8. Did you understand how your job fit into the overall operation of the company?
9. Did you have a sense of how you could advance, get promoted, or get a raise?
10. When you ran into problems, did you have enough information to solve them?
11. Was your supervisor helpful and knowledgeable about your challenges?
12. What are the biggest barriers for young people to get and keep good jobs?
13. What is one thing that could make hiring young people better in LA?
14. What would you like to say to large employers in your neighborhood or city?

Los Angeles Focus Group: Youth

- Daniella Addison
- Musaa Atif
- Yahir Chiu
- Keyana Clark-Henderson
- Stella Daley
- Chonita Foster
- Brittany Franco
- Alberto Garcia
- Meghan Mora
- Myesha Newell
- Yerimar Rodriguez
- Heidy Saravia
- Tammy Gayvalin Sujaritchai
- Jalen Wheeler

LA youth were eager to respond and share their points of view on the essential questions.

Some found their positions through LinkedIn and community colleges, as well as through local job training and placement agencies like [Guardian Scholars](#), [Ready to Succeed](#), and [Stepping Forward LA](#), all of which support foster youth and/or first-generation, lower-income college students. [LA-Tech.org](#), an organization dedicated to connecting LA's tech community to talented, underrepresented individuals, was another important source for access to employment, as were Fika Tech Career Academy and the Microsoft IT Academy. However, youth indicated that the expansiveness of LA's geography presented transportation challenges, and some felt that employers demanded too much for a minimum wage salary.

"Youth don't even know about the program so the people around them don't either. The only way to learn about employment opportunities is school or another program."

There was a general sense among young people that knowing about job opportunities was as varied as the participants themselves. To them, the process seemed arbitrary, unpredictable, and haphazard, and was largely a function of which organization or program young people happened to be affiliated with. Several commented that most of their friends know nothing about LA-Tech or other similar programs, and that **you have to already be connected somewhere to learn about programs and services.**

Thinking about what would improve access to opportunities, youth felt that **information is very cloistered and not widely available in any standardized or predictable way.** They called for more systemic strategies that would **reach them at school, in their community, and on social media.** Some even said that physical flyers in their respective communities on telephone poles or grocery stores or community center bulletin boards would be helpful. Targeted social media campaigns and job fairs would also be beneficial. Some youth spoke out against "gatekeeping"—i.e., sharing opportunities with only a few select people, and called for **greater diversity in programs and in workplaces.**

"I had to go onto You Tube for instructional videos during my work hours to learn more about my responsibilities."

Most youth participants received **little job-specific instruction** from service providers, and **on-the-job training varied widely** once they were hired. Some training showed how different departments were connected but others were general group discussions with little useful content. Particularly in fast food restaurants, even when some level of training was provided it might have been given by other junior employees who knew little more than the new hires, and didn't consider training to be part of their responsibilities. Certainly, **there were exceptions:** youth credited Stepping Forward LA and LA-Tech with building training into their processes. Further, youth felt that these two programs were the only ones that tried to identify their skills and interests. However, **youth who were placed in internships felt that they were valuable,** since the experiences helped to clarify young peoples' interests and goals.

"Because of my internship, I can focus on what I'm interested in and steer away from what I don't like. I realized I don't like lab work but really do like hands-on operational tasks."

Some **youth participants had a sense of how their roles fit into the overall mission of their employer, although in many cases they felt they were marginal** to the overall purpose as opposed to central to operations. Regarding understanding how to advance, a few young people felt that there were opportunities (if you asked), while others were placed in internships, which weren't designed for upward mobility. But even in these instances, young people felt that connections to working adults were valuable.

There were **no mentions of specific instances in which supervisors or co-workers helped young employees solve problems** or address barriers, and supervisors' sensitivity and support for young people varied widely. Once again, young employees praised Stepping Forward LA for its caring and supportive staff who valued open communication, and a young employee in a different placement mentioned that her supervisor provided his contact information and offered to discuss any issues of concern. Another young person mentioned that Slack was a useful tool to keep her supervisor updated on her situation. Beyond on-the-job challenges, **transportation was the overwhelming barrier** faced by all young people in the focus group (travel time and violence on public systems), and all agreed that, despite other transportation difficulties, transit subsidies would have been very helpful.

Some of the biggest barriers young employees faced include feeling that, even if they were prepared and well-qualified, they didn't belong and couldn't adequately fulfill their responsibilities (so-called "**Imposter Syndrome**"). Others commented on the pace of their jobs where things are constantly changing and stressed the importance of communication in these situations. Others feared competition, particularly when better-qualified, older adults were being laid off.

When asked about how youth hiring could be improved in LA, young people offered a variety of responses, including:

1. Employers being open to youth who have different experiences.
2. Giving youth a chance to gain work experience and not turning them away.
3. Flexibility in hours and working conditions.
4. Providing more reliable public transportation.
5. Holistic and comprehensive supports for young workers.
6. Limiting job descriptions and requirements to the skills and attributes that are actually needed to complete the work.

"It literally took me three hours and three buses to get to work each day. And sometimes I had to skip certain buses or trains because I didn't want to be exposed to the violence."

"Even though I went through training and my provider said I was prepared, I still doubted my ability to compete and succeed."



Questions posed to the three focus groups in New Orleans are similar to those in Los Angeles but are repeated in this section for the benefit of readers.

Employer Focus Group

Essential Questions

1. What does employer engagement mean to your work?
2. What resources have you relied on as you learned more about it?
3. What kind of data do you use? What kinds of data would you like to have?
4. What are your aspirations for employer engagement?
5. Do you have examples of strong employer practices in your community?

Echoing the LA employer focus group, NOLA employers stressed the importance **direct involvement in a continuum of activities**, from preparation to hiring, to retention, and advancement. Hospitality employers felt strongly that the **school systems should be active partners** along with employers in conveying information about open positions and the skills needed to succeed, and that this type of instruction should begin as early as middle school. Health care workers stressed that **employers should understand the challenges experienced by OT** and be supportive throughout the hiring and employment process. OT should also have access to soft skills training, including from front-line supervisors. **All agreed on the importance of parental involvement** and a positive home environment.

NOLA Employers understand that significant numbers of young adults now fall into categories like “out-of-work” and “never worked,” and have experienced generational trauma. As a result, employers strongly value the support of social services agencies to promote success for OT hires. Resource Navigators, independent social workers who confidentially work at the organization but independent from standard HR, were also seen as valuable resources. It is also important to ensure that front-line supervisors and managers understand the needs of OT and are prepared to

New Orleans Focus Group: Employers

Hotel and Hospitality

- **Dr. Harsha Chacko**
Director of Education Programs, Greater New Orleans Hotel & Lodging Association
- **Tod Chambers**
General Manager, The Roosevelt Hotel
- **Jim Cook**
General Manager, Sheraton New Orleans
- **Toya Crosby**
Education and Employment Specialist, Café Reconcile
- **Mavis Early**
Executive Director, Greater New Orleans Hotel & Lodging Association
- **Tatyana Hampton**
Recruiter, Starbucks
- **Claire Jecklin**
Executive Director, New Orleans Career Center
- **Tom Jones**
Director of HR, Sheraton New Orleans
- **Sarah Leday**
Talent Acquisition Diversity Strategist, Starbucks
- **Monique Robinson**
Chief Program Officer, Café Reconcile
- **Travis Tague**
General Manager, Hyatt Centric
- **Alejandra Vicenttin**
Area Director of Organizational Development & Human Resources, Hyatt
- **Steven Walesch**
VP Talent Acquisition, OCHSNER
- **Hillary Walker**
Director of Colleague Experience, Hyatt

Health Care

- **Shannon Joseph**
National Director of Nursing Workforce Pipeline, Ascension
- **Chris Wyre**
Learning and Organizational Development Consultant – Workforce, LCMC Health

support them, including appreciating that their prior experiences might have both hindered their acquisition of skills but also increased strength and resilience. Employers rely on a range of institutions and organizations that provide assistance and resources to support OT hiring, including community colleges, [Boys & Girls Clubs of SE Louisiana](#), the [New Orleans Children's Bureau](#), [The ARC](#), [Clover](#), and WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) one-stop centers.

"We have no choice but to upskill and provide opportunities to learn and earn or we are relegating these young people to the lowest-level jobs and lives of poverty."

Employers in both sectors recognize the importance of understanding and having **sensitivity to the OT population**, including shoring up existing training programs and sensitizing hiring managers, as well as being more exacting about sourcing the right person for the right job. At the same time, employers also appreciate the **funding limitations around employer engagement** and the need to think carefully about how to make **strategic investments that can strengthen entry-level pipelines**.

"We need to establish clear intentions about our needs and communicate them regularly and consistently to our own teams, to service providers, and to youth alike."

As was the case in LA, NOLA employers believe that **new systems** should be agreed upon and designed that would not only **identify potential OT hires** (where they are, their interests and skills, and their needs), but also **track them into and through employment** for at least one year after initial hiring. Employers understand that they can play important roles by working to identify OT needs and building internal support systems, but also agree that **the City of New Orleans could do more to promote collaboration between employers and social services agencies that support OT**. There was also support expressed for the development of disaggregated data sets from *Measure of America* that could provide powerful snapshots of current conditions in NOLA and promote improved planning and program design.

"We need a system to follow up on OT candidates and hires, tracking their trajectories and feeding that information to internal staff and also back to the referring organization so we all have a sense of what's working and what isn't."

Employers also expressed an **urgency about adopting strategies that promote OT recruitment, hiring, and advancement**, and identified several effective practices, e.g., formally mentoring new OT hires, providing workshops about the world of work, offering tuition reimbursement, tracking progress, and training supervisors. In particular, healthcare employers felt that, **without a strong and diverse pipeline, they could lose the capacity to effectively serve their patients**. Several believe that **shorter-term postsecondary certificates** and other credentials can provide access to good jobs and enable students to steadily advance into higher paying and more responsible positions. Several employers also reiterated that **career awareness and exploration should begin as early as middle schools**.

"The biggest opportunity is for us as a healthcare sector to quit competing with one another and develop strategies that will work for the industry at large, our patients, and the OT that can be our valued employees."

Additional Deeper Dive Questions

6. What has your experience been with youth-serving and job training organizations?
7. What has or hasn't worked with these relationships?
8. What has been your experience with hiring Opportunity Talent?

In general, **employers believe that there are a number of strong, high-quality youth-serving organizations** and that they play important roles in preparing and training young people. However, the **youth “system” often seems fragmented** to employers when multiple agencies repeatedly approach them with similar asks. Once again, there was strong support for strategies that could provide **accessible information about young people** so that employers could better match them with open positions, as well as for tracking hiring, advancement, and wage growth for OT. One employer also felt connections with youth-serving organizations were important to understand and possibly help families of OT, which might be in crisis.

When dealing with youth-serving agencies, **employers value regular communication and consistency of staff** so that relationships and trust can be built and maintained over time. Speaking more specifically about what's worked, some employers mentioned offering **flexible scheduling, abandoning drug tests, and instituting employee-recognition programs**. Others mentioned the need to use WIOA funds more effectively to serve OT.

Employers **consistently praise the talents and creativity of OT**, indicating that they benefit companies with their **fresh perspectives and innovative ideas**. But, once again, employers also believe it's important **to engage young people at a much earlier age** before they “turn off” to the world of work and the potential it holds. And employers also recognize the importance of **working with parents** as part of that process.

“So often we have social services agencies coming at us from all different angles and directions.”

“OT are incredibly creative, resilient, and dedicated employees when they get the right placement and support.”

Service Providers Focus Group

Essential Questions

1. What does employer engagement mean to you?
2. What resources have proven most helpful with employer engagement?
3. What are some examples of effective practices and practitioners?
4. What resources do you need?
5. Do you have the labor market information you need?
6. What tools do you use to determine young peoples' interests, skills, and gaps?
7. What roles do youth play in employer engagement?
8. What does successful employer engagement look like, and how do you measure it?
9. What doesn't work in promoting employer engagement?
10. Do you receive WIOA funding?
11. How do you fund employer engagement?

Service providers agree that **trusting relationships are at the heart of effective employer engagement**. Working together, providers and employers can partner to build a **continuum of training**, from general information to industry visits and speakers, to internships, to full-time employment, with both parties actively engaged throughout the process. Providers appreciate that they must fully understand the needs of both employers and young people so that they can **serve effectively as a bridge** between them.

Providers believe that employer engagement is most effective when there is an **institutional commitment to Opportunity Talent from the top and throughout the company**. HR teams are important, but ideally there is a powerful and influential **internal champion** who can advocate for OT throughout the organization. These champions are often the lynchpins of success, not only in sourcing but also hiring, training, and troubleshooting. **Labor market data are also important resources**, and are available from several organizations in the city, e.g., [Greater New Orleans, Inc.](#), the [Greater New Orleans Foundation](#), the [American Hotel and Lodging Association](#), and the [Louisiana Restaurant Association](#). However, providers indicate that there are multiple data sets, and that they are not standardized, suggesting the **need for one widely accepted set of research or annual data update that could serve as the foundation for planning and hiring projections**.

New Orleans Focus Group: Service Providers

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- **Anika Butler**
Program Coordinator, Youth Empowerment Project
- **Claire Jecklin**
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- **Ryan Mattingly**
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- **Monique Robinson**
Executive Director, Café Reconcile

"We need to co-design the training continuum and make commitments to OT success, not only for their benefit but also for the well-being of the companies and the communities we serve."

All providers agreed on the **need for employers to share hiring information, retention data, and wages** over the course of at least a year from hire, which would enable service providers to determine how well their preparation and support systems were working and make improvements as needed. This could be done by **adding an OT column to existing corporate applicant tracking systems**, which Hilton Hotels has pioneered. All providers also agreed that there is a general **“out of sight/out of mind” approach** once OT are hired, which serves no one well, particularly these young people who increasingly comprise the bulk of the entry-level workforce.

Providers also believe that OT placement could be improved by the availability of a **centralized clearinghouse** or database that would include information about candidates’ interests and skills, as well as a list of available supports and resources that employers could access on behalf of potential OT hires. Further, intentional training should be available to new hires from the outset, as well as information on **advancement pathways** and the supports available to progress. Industry Advisory Boards were also credited as critical levers toward alignment between employer needs and training, as are DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) resources to help identify and address barriers to equity.

Interestingly, providers mentioned **no digital platforms, diagnostic tools, or profile assessments to gauge young people’s interests and passions**. One participant offered a host of experiential ways that she gets to know young people and their interests which helps to make good matches. Providers used several traditional strategies to prepare youth for positions, including auditions with employers, mock interviews, and sharing knowledge about the company and information about the internship or placement. Providers have also deployed youth panels to give employers insights into the outlook, perspective, and talent of OT.

Providers believe that **employers have a responsibility to develop a diverse talent pool and should work in partnership with service providers** in the community which can offer a valuable human resource that, when supported effectively, can be incredibly valuable. Of course, this entails hard work to ensure that OT get the help they might need and might also mean that young hires aren’t necessarily ready to “hit the ground running.”

Several providers indicated that they **dedicated 1-2 staff members to cultivating and nurturing employer engagement**, while others reported that these responsibilities were **shared across several people** who also had other responsibilities. This is an invaluable function but, even so, it seems **underfunded**. Interesting, while several providers received SNAP/ENT to support OT, **none utilized WIOA resources**.

“If we can’t identify and track OT in the workplace, then we can’t offer the kinds of holistic support that can make the difference between success or failure on-the-job.”

Youth Focus Group

Essential Questions

12. What has the job search experience been like for you?
13. Do your friends know about youth employment programs in your area?
14. What would make the process of finding out about opportunities better in your city?
15. How many of you did any kind of job training? What was it like?
16. Did the training identify your skills and interests well?
17. Do you think this helped in matching you with a job?
18. On the job, did you receive a formal orientation or training?
19. Did you understand how your job fit into the overall operation of the company?
20. Did you have a sense of how you could get promoted or get a raise?
21. When you ran into obstacles, did you have enough information to overcome them?
22. Was your supervisor helpful, sensitive, and knowledgeable about some of the challenges you faced?
23. What do you think are the biggest barriers for young people to get and keep good jobs?
24. What is one thing that would make youth hiring better in New Orleans?

Several youths credited [YouthForce NOLA](#) for their job placements, while others found jobs on their own or with the help of their parents. One participant complained of “gatekeeping” that made it more difficult to get a job and to navigate or advance to a higher level. Another emphasized that she would appreciate it if employers could think about roles and duties that young people might enjoy. While the young people acknowledged that they were supported by various programs in preparing and securing jobs, they also emphasized that **most youth** and young adults **find their jobs and opportunities organically**, e.g., via social networking, informally, and through word of mouth, **rather than through any formal program**.

Participants had several thoughts about how opportunities could be better communicated in the city. For example, several mentioned that all youth could benefit **from greater understanding of the options and programs** that exist through **greater involvement of the schools** and/or brochures or fliers posted in schools and in the community. The

New Orleans Focus Group: Youth

- Kiara Alexa
- Klynn Gillard
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“We don’t have any formal job counselors or job placement staff in our schools.”

young people emphasized that they rarely watch TV or listen to commercial radio; their **knowledge of what is out there is found online, on social media—e.g., TikTok and Instagram, and through word of mouth.**

Job training varied across participants, with one stating that a NOLA program for preteens provided her with soft skills instruction, computer skills, and resume writing support; another described his cyber security training and network support instruction; a third stated that the fast-food industry provided little formal training; and a fourth reported that she received no training and gained understanding through her own ad hoc efforts. Participants credited **several organizations for being helpful** in identifying skills and interests, including [YouthForce NOLA](#), [NORDC Teen Council](#), [NOYA](#) Policy forums, and [Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Programs](#). And despite the spottiness of the training, several participants acknowledged that their job experiences helped them to narrow down their interests, and even when the training or job wasn't in an area they were particularly interested in, they did learn some useful skills.

"I felt like the training was useful because it exposed me to different jobs and helped me figure out whether I would be wasting my time in certain roles."

Young peoples' experiences with on-the-job training also varied by individual. One participant received an initial orientation followed by ongoing assessments gauging the extent to which he was learning required skills, while another received brief training followed by onboarding quizzes and soft skills assessments. Another said that her training was mostly in real time as she progressed on the job. And one participant reported that her experience at YouthForce NOLA was excellent where she received 3-4 weeks of training, but after placement in a fast-food job she was trained for "maybe a day or two."

Nobody explained how to get promoted, but I sensed I could do so by doing extra work without being asked; showing up to work on time every day; communicating when something comes up; and treating everyone with respect and kindness."

Most focus group participants had **little sense from supervisors as to how they fit into the overall operation** of the company. One participant said that he took regular assessments but was given no overview of how his role fit into the larger mission. Another participant commented that she received limited information as to how her role fits into the organization and that information would have been extremely valuable to her. **Nor were participants given much knowledge about how they could advance.** One participant was told it was only possible to move up if someone else left a position, and for another it was never formally communicated but a mentor was helpful in explaining some of the "hidden rules" about promotion.

Most young people reported that they experienced some level of support on-the-job and that their **supervisors were often supportive** when they faced challenges. In one instance, a training coach provided video links to help surmount technical obstacles, and another said that her supervisor shared his contact information so that she could let him know if she were dealing with any difficulties getting in the way of work. Another focus group participant stated

that supervisors at nonprofit organizations tended to be much more supportive and sensitive to the challenges she faced.

Queried about the **biggest barriers** facing young people to get and keep good jobs, participants responded:

- Lack of flexible scheduling
- Transportation issues
- Daycare
- Many jobs require more credentials than are needed, i.e., “diploma Inflation.”

“Sometimes it feels like there’s a segregation of opportunity.”

And when asked about **one thing that would make youth hiring better** in NOLA, young people responded:

- Being more responsive to the challenges that young people face
- Higher pay
- Better pathways to advancement for entry-level employees to grow in the company
- Leveling the playing field; i.e., certain segments of the population have access to opportunities while others don’t.



Findings

Key takeaways and implications

Focus group members in each city reinforced several key points identified in NYEC's literature review, *Employer Engagement and Opportunity Youth: Evidence and Next Steps for an Emerging Field*, particularly the need for better tracking of OT hires, soft and executive skills training beginning early in secondary grades, and the importance of strong and consistent partnerships between employers and youth-serving organizations to promote successful OT hiring and advancement.

In this concluding section, we summarize and discuss these and additional major themes that emerged from the in-depth focus group conversations in Los Angeles and New Orleans.

1. Defining and Instituting Employer Engagement.

Key points include:

- Employers In both cities agree that true and robust employer engagement should produce a **developmental arc of activities** jointly designed by employers and providers that promotes effective hiring, retention, and advancement for Opportunity Talent all while closing the equity gap.
- To these ends, employers and youth service providers **must develop close relationships and work in partnership at each stage**, to prepare students for the careers ahead.
- Enlightened employers increasingly view OT employment as a way to **enrich their brands** and demonstrate their commitment to **cultivating diverse talent pipelines**.

- While not a primary emphasis for this project, employers and providers consistently called for **training in soft and executive skills to begin as early as middle school** and continue into high school and beyond as a holistic approach.
 - Robust employer engagement can literally become a **lever toward equity in outcomes** and was identified time and again as **critical to sector growth and sustainability** as well as community-wide health.
 - **Employers must be full partners** with youth-serving organizations in **helping OT acquire soft and executive skills**, appreciating that OT's circumstances have likely contributed to these deficits but also understanding that their **strength and resilience** in overcoming these challenges can be a key benefit.
- 2. Track Opportunity Talent!** Focus groups in both cities stressed the importance of regular **tracking of OT hires from initial placement through advancement**—including wages, responsibilities, and promotion—for at least one year, which could help both employers and providers assess the effectiveness of their efforts. This could be as simple as adding an “OT” column in their Applicant Tracking Systems to be checked anytime youth are referred by a provider organization.
 - 3. Reverse Engineer from the Evolving Job Market.** Employers and providers alike emphasized that too often we train for jobs that “were” and not enough to what they are and will be. This sort of tight alignment between employers and training providers is essential if we are preparing OT for the most pressing needs and opportunities. It requires that they be in lock step and constantly refining and updating the training requirements based on what the markets require and where they are heading.
 - 4. Create OT Clearinghouses.** Focus groups felt strongly that **OT information and resources are far too fragmented** within their communities (and elsewhere). One solution could be a clearinghouse, a shared community resource featuring annually updated data on OT in the community; profiles of OT who are eager to find employment; job postings from participating employers with information about available training; and a collection of best practices in meeting the needs of OT.
 - 5. Assess OT Interests, Aptitudes and Aspirations.** One of the things that surprised the staff of this project the most is how much employers said they needed more profile information on OT candidates and how infrequently providers are using digital platforms and vehicles to develop that information. There are now many digital platforms on the market that can help providers to quickly profile their OT that is useful to the placement process, and this appears to be a significant opportunity for providers.
 - 6. Assess Community and Company Gaps and Fill Them.** It became increasingly clear with each focus group that both communities across both sectors are providing pieces of the employer engagement continuum as described in the first item above, but no one seems to be putting all pieces together in a single project, much less a community or the city at large. This suggests the need for a comprehensive framework that identifies gaps and directs resources across the city as needed. Simple community checklists could be developed, and cross-sector collaborations

could come together to discuss what gaps they must fill collaboratively. By the same token, there are tools (i.e., Opportunity Navigator - <https://www.opportunitynavigator.org/>), that have been developed to help companies quickly identify how they are doing against best practices in terms of hiring, supporting, retaining, and advancing Opportunity Talent. Participating companies should move in this direction in adopting standardized and regular measurements of their status and their progress.

- 7. Don't Compete.... Collaborate!** OT service providers understand that they **must operate as a coalition** that works together for collective impact **as opposed to individual organizations competing** with one other. Otherwise, it will never be possible to provide the support that youth and employers so desperately need.
- 8. Codify the Stacking of Resources.** Focus groups reiterated that resources for OT employer engagement are few and far between. Further, professionals with the knowledge and ability to identify, blend, and marshal these resources into revenue streams to support OT programming are rare commodities. Therefore, once individuals have developed this expertise, often over the course of many years, they should be recognized, rewarded, and positioned to coach and teach others.
- 9. Adopt Best Practices.** Focus groups identified several evidence-based strategies, and urged that they be codified, taught, and replicated in as many companies as possible.
 - a. Train frontline supervisors.** Institutional segregation and racism can mitigate against OT success if supervisors are not knowledgeable of and sensitive to these factors.
 - b. Provide flexible scheduling.** OT deal with many life challenges and having the ability to schedule their time is a benefit to all.
 - c. Consider OT transportation challenges.** Youth focus groups consistently mentioned their struggles getting to work, including costs, commute time, and the potential for violence. Thoughtful employers will understand these challenges and take steps to support young hires.
 - d. Provide or support childcare options.** Employers are more likely to retain high potential OT if they feel safe and comfortable with their childcare situation.
 - e. Provide Resource Navigators.** Some companies offer additional support, trained consultants outside conventional HR functions, so that OT can receive confidential guidance and resources that can address issues and help keep them employed.
 - f. Reveal the "hidden rules."** Workplaces often have hidden or unwritten "dos and don'ts" that are not necessarily shared in traditional onboarding. Explicit and transparent discussions of these workplace realities, perhaps through formal training in combination with a seasoned mentor, can help new hires navigate issues before problems arise.

- g. Offer tuition reimbursement.** Most companies that care about the growth of their employees provide some opportunity to help OT to learn while they earn, as well as covering costs of coursework and credentialing exams. This helps new employees understand that their companies are interested and invested in them.
 - h. Show them where they fit in.** Productivity can be enhanced when OT understand where they fit on the organizational chart and what pathways and supports exist for their advancement. The highest performing companies share this information with new hires early on, as well as at key intervals like annual performance appraisals.
- 10. Invest in OT to Limit Turnover.** As many as two-thirds of entry-level positions in retail and hospitality turn over in one year or less, costing thousands of dollars per transition. Therefore, adopting strategies to support OT and limit turnover makes solid business sense.
- 11. Fund Employer Engagement!** Employer engagement work requires consistency, relationship-building, and trust. As such, it is time-intensive and expensive. Funders at every level—government, employers, and philanthropy—must understand the value of this work and invest in it accordingly.

Implications for Action & Next Steps

NYEC has proposed to form Steering Committees comprised of youth, service providers, and employer members from each city. The Steering Committees will kick off in April to take these findings and these implications for action to customize a pilot approach for each city. These pilot plans should be ready for implementation by this summer. In the meantime, NYEC is working with existing funders to challenge others to support the likely cost of this work in each community.

Stay tuned for more information and greater success for Opportunity Talent in the workplace!