

Executive Summary

Business Engagement in Youth Employment

The Importance of Youth Employment: In Jacksonville, two out of three children born to a family living in the lowest 20% of the economic spectrum, will spend their lives at that level, or insignificantly better. Research shows that youth employment and the obtaining of post-secondary credentials can make a significant difference in an individual's economic mobility. Youth employment is a tactical strategy of United Way's upward economic mobility work that seeks to expose youth from the bottom levels of the economic spectrum to workforce opportunities. Workforce opportunities not only expose youth to career paths and hands-on learning but help employers fill skill gaps and shape the trajectory of their future workforce.

Prior Research: As part of United Way's work to address youth employment, PRG conducted research on youth employment initiatives and programs across the country in 2016. Research involved an analysis of four successful youth employment programs and led to the identification of five best practices: 1) tiered models, 2) customized placement, 3) significant public sector involvement, 4) systems change missions, and 5) value-add to private sector. Building off PRG's research, United Way staff set up three focus groups with community leaders to discuss tactical strategies for increasing business engagement in youth employment. Each focus group tackled the following topics: perceptions of youth employment, barriers and incentives to business participation, marketing strategies, and what successful youth employment initiatives look like.

Perceptions of Youth Employment: In each focus group respondents stated they believed that youth employment could be beneficial to employers when used as a HR strategy or as a combination of HR strategy and corporate responsibility. However, participants stated that when businesses participate in youth employment programs and initiatives as a result of civic duty only, job quality diminishes and youth often receive made up jobs or jobs that lack meaning. Additionally, some respondents from the health and financial sectors had significant concerns about the feasibility of youth employment due to confidentiality issues.

Employer Engagement and Participation: When participants were asked, "What prevents businesses from participating in youth employment initiatives?" five key factors in addition to preconceived notions of internships, youth, and youth employment emerged: 1) disconnect between opportunities and youth applicants, 2) finances, 3) time, 4) transportation, and 5) limitation of public resources. When asked "What would make businesses want to participate in youth employment initiatives?", five primary incentives emerged: 1) diversity, 2) ability to tap into a future labor force, 3) unfair hiring advantages, 4) cost effective employees, and 5) temporary work opportunities/alternative work times. While the majority of respondents believed that participating in youth employment initiatives was beneficial to the community, this reason alone did not serve as a significant impetus for participation.

In addition to the identification of incentives for participation, a robust discussion occurred with regards to marketing youth employments to the business community. From these discussions, five factors were identified that make youth employment initiatives an easier pitch to employers: 1) access to the best youth with the most potential, access to youth who have a desire to learn and are coachable, 3) provide employment opportunities to 18 and 19 year olds instead of 16 and 17 year olds, 4) provide support to make participation frictionless, and 5) provide options to participate in youth employment initiatives that are outside of the office.

Success: When asked "What does success look like for youth employment in Jacksonville?", respondents listed four overarching criteria: 1) the community will be visibly better, 2) there will be broad based buy-in, 3) a diverse cross section of employers will be involved, and 4) intermediate and long-term targets will be outlined and progress will be shared with the community. Further questioning resulted in the delineation of seven key components of success: 1) internships/employment opportunities exist year-round, 2) youth receive comprehensive training

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and develop social capital, 3) wraparound services, 4) learning from other's experiences, 5) buy-in from key stakeholders, 6) consistency across youth employment initiatives and programs, and 7) changing the conversation with youth.

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