



Personalizing the Learning and Work Experiences of Young Adults:

How to Balance Youth-Centered and Demand-Driven Talent

AT A GLANCE

As the economy struggles to recover from the pandemic and the ensuing volatility and labor shortages, leaders in the field of young adult talent development are seeing a need to develop approaches that equally address both the talent needs of employers and the education and training aspirations of young adults. This brief explores how personalized learning approaches can be used to support and balance the interests of the supply and demand sides in young adult talent development.

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About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For nearly 40 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

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About the Young Adult Talent Development Network

Since 2018, JFF's Young Adult Talent Development (YATD) Network has brought together senior leaders of over two dozen national and local entrepreneurial nonprofit organizations, along with young adult leaders who work at the intersection of education, youth development, and workforce preparation. These leaders, who primarily work in and with communities of color, share emerging strategies and operational innovations for driving improvement in the field of young adult talent development.

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Introduction

In their quest to prepare young people for the labor market, community-based organizations and their training partners have embraced talent development strategies that are sensitive to market demands and the needs of employers while helping the young adults who enter their doors in search of opportunity. Over the past two years, the disproportionate economic impact of COVID-19 on young adults has led these organizations to double down on their commitment to young adults.

Today, with the economic effects of the pandemic remaining, in the form of increased volatility and labor shortages in some industries, leaders in the field of young adult talent development are seeing the need to recalibrate demand- and supply-side approaches. They are looking to implement approaches that are both youth-centered *and* employer-centered and that deepen the engagement of program participants, employers, and talent developers. This brief explores how the pedagogical approaches of personalized learning can help in this endeavor, drawing from the insights and innovations shared by JFF's YATD Network, and offers a simple mapping tool that talent developers can use to assess where such approaches may have the greatest impact.

The Evolution of Personalization in the Young Adult Talent Development Field

Organizations focused on youth and workforce development have long prided themselves on personalizing the program experience for the young people they serve, placing emphasis on building trusting relationships with their participants. The concept of “meeting young people where they are” has become a mantra for many organizations, and the basis of a philosophy of tailoring and individualizing supports and opportunities, recognizing and building on each individual’s unique assets, and giving young people choice and voice in charting their own future.

Personalization is also evident in the ways that leading programs have developed a comprehensive approach to removing specific barriers—in the areas of housing, child care, medical care, mental health, transportation, and others—that stand in the way of a young person’s path to success. Caring adults, including program staff, family members, and friends, join forces to provide the so-called wraparound services and supports that are aimed at removing those barriers and enabling young adults to move forward into a productive adulthood.

From Personalization to Personalized Learning

As the field of young adult talent development matures, organizations seek to increasingly incorporate their trusting relationships with young people and the personalization of their support services into the education and training components of their programs. They are asking how the tenets and modalities of personalized learning can help them to deliver these components more effectively. Young people have entered these programs seeking to gain skills, credentials, and connections that will help them to join and advance in the labor market. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing turbulence in the labor market have demonstrated that offering cohorts of job-seekers training for a particular occupation or even a particular industry may be too limited an approach. Rather, young people need to develop key transferrable and technical skills that they can draw upon in a range of different occupations and industries.¹

Another effect of the pandemic has been increased use of remote and on-site/remote hybrid learning in many programs. While remote learning reduces opportunities to build relationships and trust with participants face to face, it has opened up the possibility of increasing access to young people who face geographic, transportation, or time barriers to participation. For example, many young people have work and family obligations that leave them little time to

dedicate to training, and yet they need access to effective and efficient education and training programs that will make them attractive to employers and help them advance their career goals.

The challenge for young adult talent development organizations is finding new ways to teach the competencies and skills young people need and employers want, with engaging and efficient training that is relevant to participants regardless of occupational interests and goals.

Adapting Models from K-12 Education

One important source of ideas for how to do this can be found in frameworks for integrating personalized learning into K-12 education, an area where the personalized learning movement has been gathering steam for a number of years. For example, the [Core Four of Personalized Learning](#), a framework created by Education Elements, offers a set of core design principles for K-12 education whose emphasis on student ownership and agency is resonant with the approaches of young adult talent developers. According to this framework, “everything educators do, from the classroom models they use to the content they present to students, should be oriented towards building student ownership of learning.”² The features of the Core Four framework are outlined in Table 1 and show how K-12 pedagogy are adaptable for further personalizing teaching and learning for young adults.

Table 1. The Core Four of Personalized Learning

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|---|---|
| Flexible content and tools | Instructional materials can be customized to individualize path, pace, and performance tasks, and allow for a variety of ways to demonstrate knowledge authentically. |
| Targeted instruction | Instruction is aligned to students’ specific needs and goals to create a learning environment where all individual needs can be met. |
| Data-driven decisions | Teachers use data to inform instructional decisions. Students can review their own data to make learning decisions. |
| Student reflection and ownership | Students have frequent opportunities to reflect on what they are learning and to set goals, cultivating ownership of their education. |

Balancing Personalized and Demand-Driven Approaches

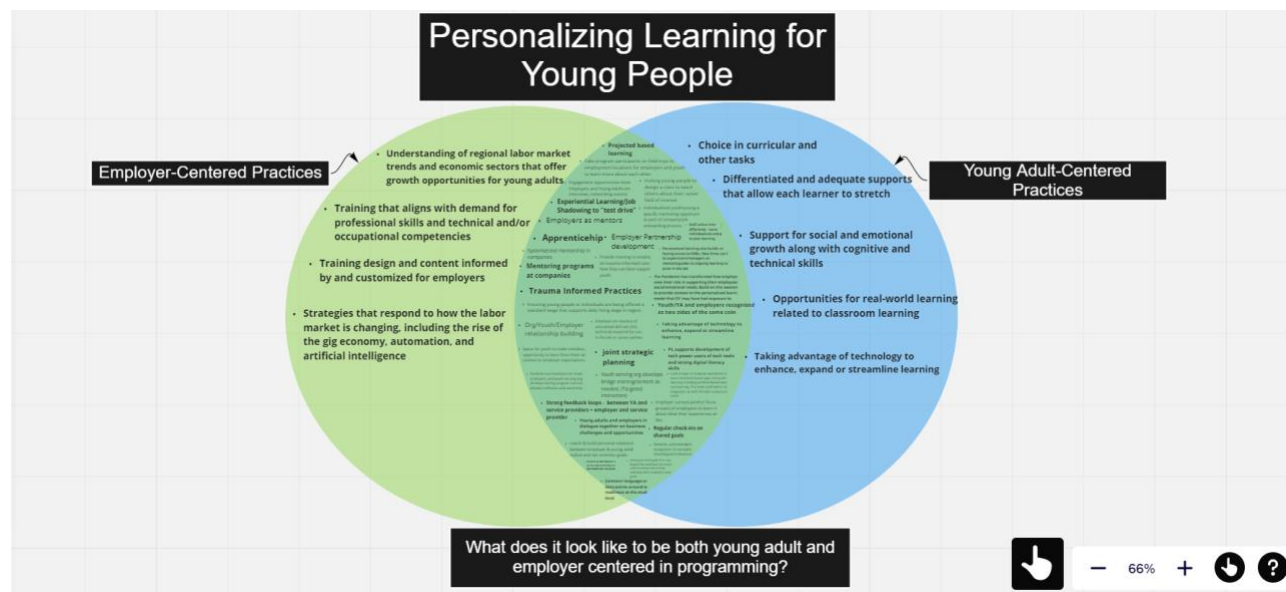
While young adult talent development organizations feel that it is important to adopt more personalized learning approaches, they grapple with how to reconcile these changes with the imperative to make their programs as aligned as possible with the labor needs of employers through demand-driven approaches. Understanding both the supply side of the talent pipeline (the needs and interests of young adults entering the workforce) and the demand side (the labor market needs of employers) is essential to balancing those needs and finding the “sweet spot” that can yield improved work and workforce outcomes for both sides by creating new opportunities to deepen engagement between talent developers, employers, and young people.

Mapping Supply and Demand in the Talent Pipeline

One way that leaders of young adult talent development organizations can determine where personalized learning approaches may have the greatest impact is to assess training models using simple mapping tools. For example, a Venn diagram can help leaders begin to identify, develop, and deliver personalized talent development approaches that fall in the sweet spot where both employer and young adult needs are met.

Such a diagram will show where youth-centered learning practices and employer-centered or market-driven training practices overlap and where personalization practices that align the needs of the two groups can help both the young people and employers to thrive. During a recent convening of JFF’s YATD Network, over two dozen leaders of talent development organizations brought perspectives from their various organizations to create a composite Venn diagram (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. YATD Personalized Learning Venn Diagram



(Source: JFF. For a closer look at the Venn Diagram, visit [Miro.com](https://www.miro.com))

The young adult-centered practices that populate the right side of the diagram provide exploration, choice, and flexibility, as well as a focus on personal and professional skill development. The employer-centered talent development practices on the left include ones that apply labor market information to program decision-making and design and that target the delivery of solutions to critical business challenges.

To identify young adult-centered practices, leaders of talent development organizations can assess the wraparound supports they offer; elements of curricula that embed or could embed choice, exploration, and flexibility; as well as participant engagement strategies that provide autonomy, voice, and ownership. Another useful starting point is to consider the four major domains outlined in the Core Four framework: flexible content and tools, targeted instruction, data-driven decisions, and student reflection and ownership.

Factors that shape the elements on the right may also include program mission and target populations (for example, consideration of the unique support needs of young adults who are involved in the child welfare or criminal justice system). Talent development leaders may additionally consider how culturally competent practices such as providing options to learn in a native language can shape their personalized learning efforts.

Employer-centered practices include training that aligns with demand for specific professional and occupational competencies and training content and activities that are informed by employers or customized to meet their individual talent needs. As talent developers identify employer-centered practices within their organizations, they should examine existing employer partnerships that define pathways and employment opportunities available to young people through their organizations.

Segments of programming where industry, employer, or labor-market information provide the key data points for decision-making will define employer-centered practices. Factors that shape the employer and demand-driven training practices include employer requests or needs and how they define or influence program elements; whether employers work collaboratively in the design of any aspect of particular program elements; and program elements that could be strengthened by employer feedback or partnership.

Table 2 lists the young adult and employer-centered activities that members of the YATD network offered in a recent convening.

Table 2. Young Adult-Centered and Employer-Centered Practices

| Young Adult-Centered Personalization Practices | Employer-Centered Learning and Training Practices |
|---|---|
| Use of individual success plans to tailor exploration of personal interests and talents and to provide support for aligning interests with a career pathway | Training design and content informed by and customized for employers |
| Support for social and emotional growth along with cognitive and technical skills development | Training that aligns with demand for professional skills and technical and/or occupational competencies |
| Opportunities to explore occupations and industries before job placement | Engagement strategies that address employers' business challenges, such as talent recruitment and retention |
| Opportunities for real-world learning related to classroom learning | Strategies that respond to how the labor market is changing, including the rise of the gig economy, automation, and artificial intelligence |

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| Use of technology to enhance and streamline learning | |
| Choice in curricular and other tasks | |

Finding the Sweet Spot

Personalized learning approaches that balance the needs of young adults and employers can be identified by answering the question, “What does it look like to be both young adult- and employer-centered in programming?” Organization and program leaders can start by reviewing current practices to determine which ones find this common ground. These might include activities that blend an emphasis on flexibility and choice with a goal of supporting young people to become more savvy consumers of labor market information. The YATD Network, in its consideration of youth- and employer-balanced activities, also pondered how personalization could bring employers and young people together sooner in the talent development pipeline. Some of the sweet spot approaches the YATD members developed were:

- project-based learning opportunities such as inviting young people to design a class to teach others about their career field of interest;
- engagement opportunities between employers and young adults such as mock interviews and networking events that open up dialogue about business challenges and opportunities;
- strong communication channels between young adults, talent developers, and employers, including regular check-in on shared and individual goals;
- mentoring programs or opportunities at employment sites; and
- earn-and-learn training models such as apprenticeship programs.

Operationalizing Balanced Approaches

Once practices that balance the talent development needs of young adults and employers are identified, an important next step is to develop a plan for implementing these personalized learning approaches. For organization leaders, this entails being strategic about where to make investments of funding, staffing, and professional development. Incorporating insights from conditions and questions they have grappled with during the pandemic, participants in JFF's YATD Network convening ideated a list of delivery considerations and training approaches that may help guide other young adult talent development agencies in developing personalized learning approaches and navigating a myriad of implementation implications (see Table 3).

YATD members utilized the list of delivery considerations to conduct mock planning for a balanced approach drawn from the group's personalized learning Venn diagram. An example from the session is included in the Appendix.

Table 3. Operational Considerations for Personalized Learning Approaches

| Key Considerations | Key Planning Questions |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Staff training and support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What instructional skills/ capacities are associated with this approach? • Do staff need to develop skills/capacity to deliver this approach? • Will staff need additional weekly or monthly planning time to deliver this approach? • What training and professional development opportunities are available to build critical skills and capacities? • Can a third-party partner deliver this approach? |
| Curriculum design | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What elements of the current curriculum align with or support this approach? • Where can the curriculum be adjusted to embed this approach? • Is there a curriculum that can supplement or replace the current curriculum that incorporates or supports this approach? |
| Scheduling and sequencing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might this approach impact or shift program scheduling? • Is there staffing and facilities to deliver this approach outside of the current program schedule, if needed? • Where would this approach fit into the current sequencing of the program? • Does this approach require a redesign of program sequencing? |

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| Implications for funding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What costs are associated with implementing this approach? • What funding is available to implement this approach? • Can funding be raised to implement this approach? |
| Ways to use tech tools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can technology and tech tools support the delivery of this approach? • Are there access and capacity for participants or staff that need to be addressed to utilize technology and tech tools in the delivery of this approach? |
| Specific roles of employers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are clear roles for employers in the delivery or planning of this approach? • How can existing employer partnerships be leveraged to deliver or plan this approach? • If new employer partnerships needed to support deliver or plan of this approach, how might we develop new relationships? |
| Pandemic-related constraints and approaches to consider | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might COVID-19 safety protocols impact or shape the delivery of this approach? • Can this approach be delivered virtually or in a hybrid on-site/remote model? |

Conclusion

While the objectives and goals of talent development may differ between young adults and employers, mapping supply and demand side practices reveals that there is inherent alignment between the young adult- and employer-centered practices. Ultimately, the two sides want the same things: the right occupational fit for talent, and success and longevity in positions. Doubling down on personalized learning in young adult talent development can help create a new and better normal in training and education, one where the two sides understand that they must work together to achieve their career and workforce goals. Talent developers continue to have a vital role to play as the bridge between the two sides who work with both young people and employers to help them understand how to utilize the assets both groups bring to the table.

Appendix

Balanced Personalized Learning Approach: One Example

Inviting young people to design a class to teach others about their career field of interest

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| <p>Staff training and support</p> | <p><i>What instructional skills/ capacities are associated with this approach?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff need to know how to prepare employers to participate including using approaches such as interviewing. • Staff need to understand the transferable skills that young people can develop through this approach and how to articulate and promote them to participants <p><i>Will staff need additional weekly or monthly planning time to deliver this approach?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders need to help staff augment barrier reduction with career readiness/employer engagement skills, possibly through partnerships with other organizations. • As a team, staff need to teach technical skills, provide employment readiness, and support social/emotional skills. • Leaders need to support staff in handling social/emotional issues and trauma. <p><i>Can a third-party partner deliver this approach?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders need to help staff augment barrier reduction with career readiness/employer engagement skills, possibly through partnerships with other organizations. |
| <p>Curriculum design</p> | <p><i>What elements of the current curriculum align with or support this approach?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connections to the skill sets and behaviors are needed in a given field. • Emphasize the idea that research and execution are opportunities to learn critical skills through scaffolded support, while being clear that this required real engagement and is much more than writing a book report. • Help participants see how those skills they have developed through their own experiences can be of value to employers, even though they may not seem directly relevant. |

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| | <p><i>Where can the curriculum be adjusted to embed this approach?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goals should be clear. Will the activity involve peer learning only, or will it also connect young people to employers? • Establish individualized assessment practices for continuous growth. • Instructor should articulate how the activity aligns to a set of skills that employers need, such as project management skills, public speaking skills, and organizational skills. • Give thought to how you introduce, reinforce, and assess skills. • Keep in mind the experiences that can help young people develop the grit and drive to achieve. • Remember the importance of teaching, reinforcing, and assessing. |
| <p>Scheduling and sequencing</p> | <p><i>How might this approach impact or shift program scheduling?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set aside a day each week—a Workforce Wednesday, for example—devoted to young people presenting their career interests. • Schedule time for young people to learn the skills necessary to give a successful Workforce Wednesdays presentation. |
| <p>Implications for funding</p> | <p><i>What costs are associated with implementing this approach?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to acquire funding to pay students “wages” to participate. |
| <p>Ways to use tech tools</p> | <p><i>How can technology and tech tools support the delivery of this approach?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strive to close the digital divide by providing access to hotspots, for example. • Use tech tools to increase transparency between employers and youth. They can share folders, connect with people in other parts of country, use various types of tech-assisted assessments, for example. <p><i>Are there access and capacity for participants or staff that need to be addressed to utilize technology and tech tools in the delivery of this approach?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train staff to use new tech tools fully and effectively so that they don’t try to replicate in the digital environment what has always been done. |
| <p>Specific roles for employers</p> | <p><i>What are clear roles for employers in the delivery or planning of this approach?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers can participate in events such as Workforce Wednesdays. |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They can identify the specific employability and technical skills that are required in their field. For example, taking initiative has a completely different value in health care than in construction. • They can provide real-life examples of what an employee does in a specific job description. |
| Pandemic-related constraints and approaches to consider | <p><i>Can this approach be delivered virtually or in a hybrid on-site/remote model? If so, how might this impact or shape the delivery of this approach?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people need help knowing how to deliver online presentations on platforms such as Zoom. • Staff need to know how to assess students in a virtual environment and help them understand the importance of virtual meeting skills. • Staff also must be prepared to personalize supports for young people to develop those online skills. |
| Other considerations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students need to know what they don't know so they can ask the right questions; how do you guide them to that self-knowledge? |

Endnotes

¹ Lili Allen, Sara Lamback, and Laura Roberts, *How Young People Can Advance in a Turbulent Economy* (Boston, Massachusetts: JFF, October 2021), [https://jfforg-prod-new.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/How Young Adults Can Advance in a Turbulent Economy.pdf](https://jfforg-prod-new.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/How_Young_Adults_Can_Advance_in_a_Turbulent_Economy.pdf).

² Scott Johns and Mike Wolking, *The Core Four of Personalized Learning: The Elements You Need to Succeed* (South San Francisco, California: Education Elements, 2016), [https://www.edelements.com/hubfs/Core Four/Education Elements Core Four White Paper.pdf](https://www.edelements.com/hubfs/Core_Four/Education_Elements_Core_Four_White_Paper.pdf).