# A Toolkit to Engage Employers and Opportunity Youth on the Future of Work

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# Introduction

The future of work has received an avalanche of attention over the past several years from the media, academics, and policymakers. But to date, much of the conversation has been theoretical, speculative, or too broad to be of much use to community leaders who need to understand how the future of work is playing out right now in their local economies. Even less attention has been paid to how opportunity youth (young people who are neither in school nor working) may experience changes in the economy.

Given this context, the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS) and Economic Opportunities Program, with the generous support of the Citi Foundation, have developed a practical framework for focused local labor market inquiry. The purpose of this approach is to build a foundation of information from which community leaders can diagnose how the nature and structure of local work may be changing now and to begin to think through, with more actionable data, implications for opportunity youth and strategies to consider going forward.

Important questions include: How is technology changing the nature and structure of work for specific occupations that are important first steps for opportunity youth? Are there other changes that may not be directly associated with technology but are driving the elimination of specific jobs, creating new jobs, changing the tasks of jobs, or changing scheduling or location of work? Do any of these changes have implications for skill requirements? For job quality?

Answering these questions is key to designing and implementing workforce strategies that can help ensure that opportunity youth are equitably prepared to participate in today's and tomorrow's changing economy. At the heart of this toolkit is an *Inquiry Framework* that includes practical questions to ask business representatives and young people about their knowledge of and

experiences in specific occupations. These types of questions can be built into existing employer engagement work, for example by expanding on discussions about job openings or application procedures to learn more about an occupation and a company. The inquiry framework is designed to help program leaders become experts in occupations that are important to their OY constituents.

Over several months, researchers from the Aspen Institute worked with three leaders of organizations whose work focuses on opportunity youth in New York, Denver, and Seattle, and who were selected through a competitive request-for-proposal process among Aspen's Opportunity Youth Forum.[1] These leaders pilot-tested the inquiry framework with employers, young people, and other community stakeholders and shared insights about what they learned about employment for OY in their communities as well as feedback on the inquiry process itself. They conducted interviews with young people employed in selected "now" and "career" occupations to form a picture of how those particular jobs might be changing given different dynamics at play in specific industries and labor markets. Interviews they conducted with employers in the same industries added to filling out this picture with business perspective. A fuller description of this process and highlights of learning from pilots is summarized in this document.

## About the Toolkit

The goal in developing this toolkit was to provide a starting point for community leaders to learn about changes happening now that can provide insights about future changes in the nature and structure of work and related implications for youth and young adults in their communities. In some communities, this inquiry may add to future of work efforts already underway and help ensure that other local initiatives are informed by—and take into consideration—opportunity youth as an important (if often overlooked) demographic. In other places, the inquiry process might help kick off an investigation into the changing nature of work and spur leaders in the community to take a more proactive approach to understanding current and potential impacts of changes. The toolkit is *not* intended to provide specific answers and strategies to mitigate, better prepare for, or in other ways address the changing nature of work. Our underlying hypothesis is that an important first step is to ask questions of key stakeholders, in this case employers and young people, and to begin to build a picture, informed by data, of the current context for occupations that are important for young people, and how these occupations might be changing today.

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[1] https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/opportunity-youth/

# Getting Started

This *toolkit* provides practical guidelines and tools for learning about the nature (skills, tasks, and responsibilities) and structure (schedule, location, scale, and employment classification) of work locally. It includes a framework with questions to guide conversations with employers and young adults in your community to learn from them about local employment. This inquiry framework does not ask employers or workers to make predictions about the future of work, rather it asks questions about what they know about the nature and structure of occupations today—and things they can see changing now.

Conversation topics include:

- What does **employment demand** for a specific occupation look like now? What do local people know about how the need for workers in an occupation is changing now?

- What are the **skills and credentials** needed for an occupation? Are any of the requirements changing now?

- What role do **gig, part-time, and seasonal** employment currently play in an occupation? Are changes occurring now?

- What **market forces** are influencing an occupation now?

- How is **technology** influencing an occupation now?

## Choosing an occupation to explore

The inquiry framework provides a set of questions to help guide conversations with employers and young adults about a specific occupation of interest. We recommend you approach your learning-focused inquiry occupation by occupation, beginning with an occupation that is important to the young people you serve. Over time, and perhaps in collaboration with others in your community, you can compile information that you understand and trust and that will be relevant to you for program planning and implementation purposes.

Because programs serving young adults have both short-term and long-term goals for young people, the framework includes questions appropriate for "now jobs" as well as "career" jobs.

⏰ ***"Now" jobs*** are relatively accessible, have low barriers to entry, employ large numbers of young people in a community, and are important because they provide young people opportunities to earn income and to start to get work experience.

📇 ***"Career" jobs*** include occupations that organizations are investing in education, training, and other supports to help young adults qualify for and gain access to over time.

## Background research

A little background research about an occupation and its local labor market context can be helpful to prepare for conversations with employers and young adults. Selected resources include:

### *Occupational projections*

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) produces long-term (10-year) projections for employment in US communities. The most recent available projections cover the period 2016 to 2026[2] and provide information about:

- the number of jobs by occupation in 2016

- median annual wage

- projected 10-year job change by occupation

Projections take into account a variety of factors that drive change in an occupation, including technological innovation, organizational restructuring of work, offshore and domestic outsourcing, and trends in growth or decline in associated industries.

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[2] BLS national- and state-level projections for 2018-2028 were released in September 2019. Over time, states will update their sub-state regional projections.

State governments report local employment projections based on disaggregated BLS data. They compile and report projections for Metropolitan Statistical Areas, counties, and other locally defined sub-state regions. Because there is a lot of variance in how states provide data for public use, we developed Employment Outlook Projections: A Community Guide,[3] which provides step-by-step instructions tailored for many Opportunity Youth Forum communities.

As you look at employment projections for your community, it is important to focus on job numbers and change in the absolute number of jobs in an occupation over time. Focusing on employment change in terms of percentages may hide important information. This is because high-growth occupations (based on percentage change) may include occupations with relatively few jobs overall. And jobs that employ large numbers of people may not be growing or declining much percentage-wise, but nevertheless are extremely important in the local labor market.

### *Living wage calculators*

Living wage calculators are helpful tools for comparing the prevailing wage of an occupation to the wage needed to support minimum living standards in a county, MSA or other region. One helpful and widely used tool is the MIT living wage[4] calculator, which estimates the cost of living in a community or region based on typical expenses for food, child care, health care (including insurance premiums and typical health care costs), housing, transportation, and other necessities. The calculator accounts for household composition to estimate expenses and determine the minimum wage needed by a worker to support a family.

In addition to the above, Reimagine Retail Chicagoland recently published a toolkit for workforce service providers[5] that includes a helpful section on using labor market information. And we have developed an extensive question bank for developing conversations with employers.[6] The questions that follow in this inquiry framework are a subset of the question bank.

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[3] https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/employment-outlook-projections-a-community-guide-may-2019/
[4] http://livingwage.mit.edu/
[5] https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/reimagining-employer-engagement-toolkit/
[6] https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/question-bank-for-workforce-service-providers-a-tool-for-working-with-retailers/

While we recommend you get out in the field and talk with employers and workers as quickly as possible, here are a few questions you could explore via a little desk research to help you prepare:

- What do you and others in your **network** know about a company and the experiences of its workers?

- What can you learn about **job openings, application procedures, and career opportunities** by visiting a company's "career" site, Glassdoor, or other employment sites? (keeping in mind that individuals motivated to write reviews are frequently those who have had very negative or very positive experiences).

- Is the **company** locally owned? Where is its corporate headquarters? Are there different brands under the same corporate umbrella?

- What has the company been communicating publicly via recent **press releases**?

- Has the company been in the **news** recently? Why?

## Selecting Employers and Young Adults to Interview

The purpose of this inquiry process is to obtain practical information to inform local programming that will help young adults prepare for and connect to jobs with a future.

Once you've selected an occupation of interest, we recommend you begin by having conversations with employers and young adults with whom you have existing relationships. You might also want to check in with colleagues to learn if others in your community have similar questions, relationships with businesses or young adults you can learn from, or information that could give you a head start.

Ideally, you would have conversations with employer representatives and young adults working for the same company. Employer representatives could include: the owners and/or founders of a business, human resource representatives, managers of workers in the occupation of interest, and/or regional district managers. You will learn the most by talking with representatives of a firm who have knowledge about both hiring practices and operations. In larger firms, this could require interviewing multiple people.

# Inquiry Framework

The inquiry framework is essentially two sets of questions about work and workplace. Questions are geared toward young adult workers and employer representatives and have practical implications for workforce program planning and implementation.

- Please keep in mind that there are far too many questions in the framework to ask in one interview. Questions are intended to help craft learning-focused conversations.

- You should pick and choose a mix of questions based on your objectives, your relationship, what you already know about the business, occupation, and person you are interviewing, and the amount of time you have for a conversation.

- The first question in each section is designed to be very open-ended. While these questions are very likely to yield helpful information related to other questions in the section, they are intended to help you begin to establish rapport and common ground.

- Prior to an interview, identify a few questions that are most important to your learning interests and prioritize these for discussion.

- Be prepared to discuss why you want to talk with the people you interview and how you plan to use what you learn.

Questions in the framework address three areas of inquiry:

## Employment Demand

The purpose of these questions is to learn about local employment demand for a specific occupation, the credentials and experiences required, and typical application, hiring and onboarding processes. Discussion spurred by these questions can yield information about the nuts and bolts of hiring as well as insights into how a firm supports younger workers who are getting started in the workforce.

## The Changing Structure of Work

The purpose of these questions is to learn about the structure of work in a specific occupation today. Structure of work includes things such as location and schedule for work and employment classification (e.g., part-time, full-time, temporary, contractor, employed by staffing agency). Rather than asking employers or workers to make predictions about the future, questions are oriented toward asking interviewees to reflect about what's changing now.

The type of information you learn from questions of this type can build your understanding about whether and how employment relationships are changing (for example, is a company starting to subcontract more? Starting to use staffing agencies more? Starting to hire more part-time workers?) Changes like this have implications for job quality (for example, predictability of earnings and eligibility for health insurance and paid time off) as well workers' ability to qualify for unemployment and other workers' compensation programs.

## The Changing Nature of Work

The purpose of these questions is to learn about the tasks involved in an occupation, the skills and experiences needed to perform tasks, and insights about how these might be changing now. Changes in the nature of work within an occupation may be influenced by technology and/or other market forces such as new environmental or safety standards or new labor regulations.

## Questions for Employers

*Opening question: Tell me about your business and the need for workers in [target occupation]?*

*Potential follow-up questions include:*

- How many employees work here? How many employees work in [target occupation]?

- How many employees in [target occupation] are young adults? How common is it for this occupation to be a young person's first job?

- How long do employees typically work in [target occupation]? What do you know about why people stay? What do you know about why people leave?

- What's the typical starting wage and hours for employees in [target occupation]? Does this change over time as they gain tenure with the company? In what ways?

- Tell me about how you hire staff for this occupation. How do you recruit? What is involved in screening (e.g., application process, assessments, work-based tests)?

- What educational credentials are needed to get a job in [target occupation]? What other skills and experiences are you looking for workers in [target occupation] to have?

- What is the process for training and onboarding new employees in [target occupation]?

- Has it been difficult to find employees to work as [target occupation]? Has this been changing? In what ways?

## Questions for Employers (cont.)

***Opening question: Tell me about the tasks and responsibilities of a worker in [target occupation]. What skills and experiences do they need to be successful?***

*Potential follow up questions include:*

- Are there any tasks for workers in [target occupation] that are changing now? In what ways? Why?

- Do changes in tasks require similar or different skills? If different, are these skills that an employee can learn on the job? Or do they require more formal education and training? What type?

- If a worker in [target occupation] wants to advance here, what position is the next step? Can a worker get the experience or training needed for this position while employed in [target occupation]? If not, does the business pay for training? Can employees attend training during working hours?

- In what ways does technology have an influence on changing tasks for [target occupation]

- Do you know about other changes your business is planning that could influence the responsibilities and skills needed for [target occupation]?

**Questions for Employers (cont.)**

*Opening question: Tell me about other characteristics of work in [target occupation]. What's the schedule like? Where are workers located? Are workers generally employees, independent contractors, employed by staffing agencies?*

*Potential follow-up questions include:*

- What's the mix of part-time and full-time workers in [target occupation]? Is it changing? In what ways and why? In what ways does this influence wages or benefits that workers are offered?

- Do you use staffing agencies or independent contract workers for [target occupation]? Is the company's use of staffing agencies or independent contract workers changing? In what ways? Are there ways that this influences earnings or benefits for workers (including employees)? How?

- What are the locations where [target occupation] work on a regular basis? Have there been recent changes or are there changes planned? What types of changes?

- Are there ways that technology is changing the way work is conducted in [target occupation]? Technology could include mobile apps, iPads, laptops or other computer equipment, robots or other machines or something else that your company is using that changes work or that does work itself. Is anything about technology changing the number of jobs in this occupation? Can you tell me a little about this?

- Do you use software to manage worker scheduling? What's the cadence like in terms of workers getting their schedules? How far in advance do they know when they're scheduled to work?

- Are there ways in which scheduling is changing? How?

- Are workers in [target occupation] typically asked to sign noncompete clauses? What can you tell me about the terms of these agreements?

- Do you know anything else that your business is currently planning that could change how work is structured (in terms of employment status, schedule, location, number of workers) in [target occupation]?

## Questions for Young Adults

***Opening question: Can you tell me how you found your job and why you were interested in working here?***

*Potential follow-up questions include:*

- What do you do? What's your job title?

- How long have you worked here?

- Is this your first job? If not, what kind of work did you do before this job?

- Who is your employer? [target occupation company]? Are you employed by a staffing agency? Are you considered an independent contractor at this business?

- Was it difficult to find an employer hiring for [target occupation], or were there a lot of job openings in this type of position?

- What was your experience like applying for your position? Was there an online application? Did you apply in person? Was there a skills or personality assessment? Any background or credit checks? Drug screen?

- Can you describe your experience with "fitting in" working here? Do other young people typically work in this job?

- What are some of the reasons that young people leave this occupation?

- Can you describe your beginning experience working here? What type of training did you get for your work in [target occupation]? Who helped you learn about the company and your job when you first started?

- If you want to advance here, what position is the next step? Can you get the experience or training you need for this position while doing your current job? What do you know about how you can get the skills or experiences you need to get to the next position?

**Questions for Young Adults (cont.)**

*Opening Question: Can you describe the kind of work you currently do at [business]? What are your job responsibilities? What's a typical shift like?*

*Potential follow-up questions include:*

– Are any of your job responsibilities changing now? In what ways?

– Do new job responsibilities require different skills? What are they?

– Are there any tasks that are taking up more and more of your time on a shift? Can you tell me about this?

– Are there any tasks that are becoming easier or taking less time? Can you tell me about this?

– Do you know of anything your employer is planning that could change the type of work you are expected to do?

– Are there any ways that technology is changing your job? Technology could include mobile apps, iPads, laptops or other computer equipment, robots or other machines or something else that your company is using that changes how you or your colleagues do work or that does work itself.

– Has your employer provided any training to help you prepare for changes in your job? Do you know of plans for future training?

## Questions for Young Adults (cont.)

***Opening question: Tell me about how your work is structured in terms of hours, schedule and location.***

*Potential follow-up questions include:*

- Are you working full-time, or do you have a part-time schedule? Is the schedule your choice? [If part-time] Do you know how you could transition to full-time employment at your company?

- Have you noticed whether the mix of part-time and full-time workers in [target occupation] is changing? In what ways?

- What is your schedule like? Is it predictable and consistent in terms of timing, shifts and number of hours per pay period? Or does it fluctuate from week-to-week or month-to-month?

- Since you began working at this company have there been changes in the way your work has been scheduled? What kinds of changes?

- What is the location for where you work? Do you work at multiple sites? Do you ever telework from home?

- Have there been any changes to the location of your work? What kind of changes?

- Are there ways that technology is influencing your work with regard to your schedule or the location of your work?

- Do you know of anything your employer is planning that could change your work location, schedule or employment status?

# Pilot Tests in Denver, New York and Seattle

Opportunity youth collaborative leaders in Denver, New York, and Seattle were selected through a competitive process. In brief proposals, leaders described how their organization and others in their communities were currently investigating issues related to the future of work for opportunity youth. They described their interest in and commitment to engaging in a learning process with teams from ACFS and EOP and to collaborating on development of a practical approach to inquiry about changes in the nature and structure of work in occupations important to their opportunity youth constituents. Over the course of several months, site leaders undertook the following steps:

1. Selected a "now" job and a "career" job relevant to OY in their communities.

| Local Partners | "Now" Job | "Career" Job |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Denver Opportunity Youth Initiative | Construction trades worker | Medical assistant |
| JobsFirstNYC | Customer service associate | Green jobs technician |
| City of Seattle and Community Center for Education Results | Retail sales associate | IT technician |

2. Utilizing a pilot version of the Inquiry Framework, conducted eight or more interviews with business owners, HR and operations managers, and young adults employed in each occupation.

3. Over a series of debriefing and learning calls, shared highlights from interviews with the EOP-AFCS team and provided important input on improvements to the inquiry framework and tools (reflected in this document).

4. Participated in a session at the Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum in Philadelphia in April 2019 to share their experiences using the Framework, the issues important in their communities, and to discuss challenges and opportunities associated with the changing nature and structure of work.

5. Engaged in discussions with stakeholders in their communities to expand existing conversations about future of work to include issues related to OY and to include other actors in the workforce ecosystem—examples include: a) an urban school network that is infusing career readiness preparation throughout their curriculum; b) a State Workforce Development Council; and c) Career Navigators and the local workforce council.

## Early Learning from Pilots[7]

Examples of findings from pilots of the inquiry approach are helpful for illustrating the types of practical information that can be gleaned through deep-dive discussions with people who have firsthand knowledge about an occupation. It is important to note that pilots were limited in terms of both occupations explored and by the number of workers and employers interviewed. Our objective in sharing findings is not to draw conclusions about a particular occupation. In fact, our pilot testers' inquiries generated even more questions than they answered. But over time, with input from more workers and employers, the goal would be to gather the type of information about an occupation that would be helpful for opportunity youth program leaders seeking to identify employment opportunities that hold promise for young people and that can underpin development of programming and strategies to prepare young people effectively for these. With these goals and caveats in mind, the following are examples of learning from the pilots.

***Findings from pilots reinforce what we know about the importance of soft skills.***

Across occupations explored, communication, ability to work on a team, good judgement, problem-solving, critical thinking, and other "power" skills were noted as highly valued by employers. Findings underscore the importance of finding ways to not only help more OY develop, but also to demonstrate that they have these competencies.

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[7] For reasons of confidentiality, names of employers and youth are not cited; rather, findings are summarized based on the site interviews conducted across the three cities.

***The number of part-time jobs is growing.***

Pilot-testers were not surprised to learn from workers and employers that the structure of work is changing toward more part-time employment. This is a shift that OY program leaders note has been accelerating in recent years. At the same time, one employer operating in a very tight labor market noted making significant changes to the structure of its workforce, creating more full-time jobs and raising wages. The current tight labor market can act as a powerful driver for changes that improve job quality as firms seek to attract workers and retain them longer.

***In some cases, technology was identified as helping to address work-related challenges.***

Workers at several companies described how new technology adopted by their employers helps them. In Seattle and New York City, workers talked about how scheduling apps give them greater ability to plan their schedules and also to make changes that give them flexibility to manage responsibilities outside work. Scheduling is a critical aspect of job quality. Work schedules affect not only earnings but also young workers' ability to retain employment and persist in education programs. Follow-up questions about how these employers integrate technology and workplace management practices in ways that workers note as being supportive could yield information to share broadly in a community. In Denver, an employer noted that use of virtual design software has helped improve worker efficiency and construction project management.

***"Career" occupations require both post-secondary credentials and employment experience.***

Post-secondary education is critical for all of the "career" jobs explored. But opportunity youth also need to get positive "now" job experiences to be well-positioned when they complete an education program. Testers learned about specific credentials that employers value and more detailed information about the types of experiences their constituents need to get from "now" jobs.

***The inquiry framework has a range of uses.***

Opportunity Youth program leaders who convene employers in sector partnerships noted the value of the framework for facilitating discussions in these types of forums. It can be challenging to manage group conversations so that they are useful for informing a program's strategies. Sharing a framework for the conversation can help to focus discussion so that program leaders get information they need to plan. It also has potential to spur conversation around workplace practices that present barriers to hiring and retention.

In communities where an existing economic or workforce development "table" is convening around future of work issues, bringing the framework and learning from it not only has helped OY leaders get a "seat" but also sets them up to be valuable contributors who bring new and practical information.

# Where do we go from here?

We expect that this toolkit provides a starting point for community-based conversations and investigations into questions about how work is changing given rapid developments in technology and other potentially disruptive trends. Going forward, we aim to engage more community leaders in the Aspen Opportunity Youth Forum to test this toolkit and provide additional insight into what they see as the most pressing implications of changes in the nature and structure of occupations that are important to OY in their communities.

In addition, with the recently launched Global Opportunity Youth Initiative,[8] we have an opportunity to test this toolkit and process in communities outside the United States to consider how other economic environments differ or share similar implications for the future of opportunity youth work.

Over time, informed by local leaders who use the toolkit, we hope that together we can build a body of data and insights that will directly inform policy and practice intended to help opportunity youth get the support they need in their pathways into employment in occupations and workplaces that may be changing. And we hope to build on these efforts and communicate about potential strategies, innovative models, and/or policy proposals for community leaders to consider.

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[8] https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/global-opportunity-youth/

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# Notes