

Not Your Grandfather's Apprenticeship: Why Young People Looking Forward Are Wise to Look Back

Jennie Sparandara 18 May 2012

Introduction

I never knew my paternal grandfather, but growing up I heard a lot about his job. He worked as a pressman in New York City in the years preceding and following World War II. With no previous experience in machining, my grandfather learned and was trained on the job. I don't know how much his job changed over the years, but as the presses became more sophisticated he had to keep current with the changing technology. He worked in the lithography field for thirty-seven years, from age seventeen to fifty-nine, and moved from apprentice to operator, and ultimately to senior pressman. I believe that he brought to that position a set of core competencies, what we today call foundational skills. From there, his education and training were done through the company's apprenticeship and training programs.

In the seventy-five years since my grandfather started at Queens Lithography Company much has changed about the way young people start their careers and

conceptualize their career paths. Our educational systems have grown and changed, and post-secondary education is most often emphasized as the path to opportunity. I'm not here to disagree with the value of post-secondary education or to glorify the labor market or jobs of the past. However, in our counseling of young people away from apprenticeships and toward post-secondary education we've done them a great disservice by reinforcing an old idea that you must choose between work and education. What a host of evidence-based education and training programs has taught us is that work and education can be thoughtfully combined to great benefit for the learner.

In this article I will explore a set of innovative training programs that demonstrate promising results in connecting young people to work. They show how work and education can be combined in innovative models that achieve significant positive results for employers and jobseekers. I'll also explore how funders, government and community organizations can collaborate to seed new program models, drive resources toward what works, and help decision makers in all sectors improve the bleak outlook for both young people and employers.

The Challenge: How to Connect Increasingly Disconnected Young People to Work

The 2012 McKinsey and Company report, "Education to employment: Designing a system that works," details

some of the sobering global statistics regarding the challenge young people face in finding employment. Seventy-five million youth are unemployed worldwide. At the same time, almost 40% of employers report that a lack of skills is the main reason for entry-level vacancies. Globally, young people are three times as likely to be unemployed as their parents. Youth unemployment matters tremendously, because young people who do not attach to the labor market successfully are more likely to struggle economically throughout their lives. According to the Center for American Progress, young Americans will lose "a staggering \$20 billion over the next twenty years." The report continues that today Americans under the age of 40 have accumulated less wealth than their parents did at that age more than 25 years ago; and more than 13 percent of borrowers—mainly young adults—have defaulted on their student loans, and another 26 percent are delinquent. Increasing numbers of young people have to settle for part-time work or for temporary jobs when permanent full-time employment is sought.

Promising Solutions: Industry Led, Integrated & Career Oriented

The statistics paint a bleak picture. They also call out for the dissemination and scaling of solutions that create opportunities for young people to more effectively connect to work. Extensive analysis by economists, social scientists, and business experts illuminate a number of

strategies that work by breaking down the barriers between education, training and work. These strategies share important program elements, and coincidentally they are some of the same basic elements that led to my grandfather's success a half-century ago:

Industry-led: Overwhelmingly, the most effective initiatives are employer-driven and industry-led to ensure that individuals are trained for high-demand jobs. These programs convincingly make the business case to employers for job training, further incentivizing employer investment and bringing employers and educational organizations together to collaborate. Industry-led strategies utilize employer feedback to create and refine curricula, validate credentials and ensure that teachers teach technical and foundational skills with real-world applications.

Integrated: Model programs are also integrated, meaning they don't approach education, training and work as discrete activities. Instead, education is contextualized to work, and the barriers between education and training are broken down by offering education on-the-job and bringing employers into classrooms. By envisioning education and training as important, but non-sequential components, these programs free themselves to meet employers where they are. For example, an integrated program will recognize that an employer may have an urgent need to hire; and will build education and training around a placement program.

Career-oriented: Best practice initiatives recognize that the keys to success in the 21st century economy include technical skills and technological literacy, an ability to learn continuously and adapt to environments of constant change, and economic security. Workers need income stability in order to deal with the more frequent shocks of the modern economy. Career and financial coaching, informal and formal mentorship programs and network building are all ways that these programs set workers up for long-term success.

The New Apprenticeship Models

What I'm calling the new apprenticeship models don't necessarily brand themselves that way, but they incorporate the best practices elements described above, and have the outcomes to demonstrate their success. They share some of the qualities that mark more traditional apprenticeships (from those in the American trades, to the overseas models employed in Germany and Korea): utilizing internships, externships and on the job learning, while demonstrating a new flexibility and creativity in understanding what young people need to learn and which methods can best impart that information.

While there are a plethora of programs that share these qualities, I'll focus on just two: West Philadelphia Skills Initiative and Year Up.

The West Philadelphia Skills Initiative (WPSI): Three years ago, the University City District (UCD), a special services district that operates in West Philadelphia, started planning a new workforce development program that would leverage UCD's relationships with its major institutional partners to offer a series of skills development programs to increase the number of West Philadelphia residents working in those same institutions. The resulting initiative, WPSI, works to address an ironic disconnect: in a community marked by tremendous assets and investments, community members continue to face significant economic disadvantage.

WPSI works through a series of interconnected programs including the Youth Employment Network, the Center for Economic Advancement, and Neighborhood Job Pipelines. While all of the programs share best practice elements, it is illustrative to highlight some specifics in the Neighborhood Job Pipelines. The Pipelines create mini-apprenticeships in order to assist employer partners in filling middle-skilled jobs. WPSI staff cultivate relationships with employers by identifying specific human resources needs within the organization. These issues may range from persistent challenges around entry-level turnover to the inability to source candidates with a particular credential. WPSI staff then work in partnership with the employers to develop a tailored "earn and learn" model in which participants, referred to as interns, are paid a wage while attending training. Training includes

classroom and job-based learning with ample opportunity for hands-on work. Interns are specifically trained not just to the technical specifications outlined by employer partners, but in the specific organizational culture of the employer as well. This focus on both the technical and foundational skills has resulted in average retention rates for the program exceeding 95%.

Year Up: Year Up is a Boston-based nonprofit organization that was founded in 2000 to assist disconnected young people in becoming involved with careers. In 2013, the GreenLight Fund Philadelphia, an organization dedicated to bringing evidence-based models and innovative nonprofits to new communities, invested resources to bring Year Up to Philadelphia. The Year Up model shares many program elements with WPSI. It pairs six months of technical skills training, often offered through partnership with local community colleges, with classroom-based learning on 21st century skills. Once again, educational curriculum and training plans are driven by industry needs as determined by the corporate partnerships cultivated by Year Up staff and leadership. A six-month internship follows, in which participants have the opportunity to apply what they learned previously in real-world settings. A weekly stipend is provided to participants during both phases of the program. Year Up has been extensively studied; a randomized control trial revealed that its students earned 30% more than comparable students outside the program.

Both WPSI and Year Up have strict performance standards. WPSI includes a “phased attrition” approach – the program is competitive in order to simulate the labor market. Year Up requires that students maintain high attendance rates and continue to perform. Students who repeatedly fail to meet expectations “fire themselves” from the program. Both projects are career-oriented in that they provide ample support and guidance from staff to discuss and address personal and career-related challenges. The focus is not simply on getting a job, but keeping a job and developing a career.

How Funders, Government and Community Can Do More To Support What Works

There are a number of ways that funders, government and community can better support the development of models that test new approaches to skills-building as well as the scaling of models that have a strong track record of success. The Job Opportunity Investment Network (JOIN) actively works to create a space for public and private funders and partners to collaborate, invest, evaluate and scale. There are several ways public and private partners can work together to increase economic opportunity for young people:

Increase the number of resources supporting innovation and focus institutional resources on scaling what works. JOIN was created to address the paucity of

flexible funds that support R&D in skill development. Funder collaboratives like JOIN create the space for public and private funders to share best practices, data and strategy, and to maximize critical resources.

Increase the supply of labor market and program information, and actively work to disseminate it to key audiences. Critically valuable is the development and sharing of strong labor market information and program data. Shining a light on what works requires a deep understanding of which initiatives connect clearly to employer needs and how effective programs are at achieving outcomes for learners and employers.

Engage employers as partners and co-investors. Employers need to be engaged both as partners and co-investors in education and training activities. The lack of a prepared workforce is not just a problem for the unemployed; businesses suffer the bottom-line impacts as well. Employers also play a key role in scaling what works. Even with diminishing professional development investments, the private sector funds most job training. By influencing how they spend those resources, philanthropists and community partners have a unique vehicle to scale their work.

Elevate what works. Government, funders and community partners have sizable platforms from which they can share best practices. Case studies, forums, videos and conferences all must be utilized to spread the

good word about what works and how to implement these resources.

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The West Philadelphia Skills Initiative, more information available at: <http://universitycity.org/west-philadelphia-skills-initiative>

Year Up, more information available at: <http://www.yearup.org/>