

Evidence Brief

Eight Promising Practices to Increase Economic Participation for Youth

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work and Google Scholar using the following key terms: "youth," "employment," "entrepreneurship," and "community."

Summary of Evidence:

Eight Promising Practices to Increase Economic Participation for Youth

1. Understand youth in terms of their strengths and assets.

Organizations can better serve youth by adopting a strength-based approach and recognizing their assets. This differs significantly from the deficit-based approach that many organizations and mainstream institutions adopt. Organizations can engage with youth in a more humanizing, empowering way, by seeing the 'problems' they face as connected to broader social issues, where the deficit is located in society and social structures, not in youth themselves (Baldrige, 2014).

For instance, research shows that discrimination is a significant barrier to youth participation in the labour market. Youth report experiencing discrimination based on race, religion, age, and place of residence – and, in the case of immigrant youth, language and accent (Lauer, Wilkinson, Yan, Sin, & Tsang, 2011; Shier, Graham, Goitom, & Eisenstat, 2014). Organizations should validate youth experiences and recognize the harmful effects of internalizing stigma. Develop an organizational culture in which staff recognize young people's strengths, such as resilience, resourcefulness, and agency.

2. Recognize and acknowledge barriers to economic participation.

Organizations should consider the challenges that NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) youth may face, and provide supports to address these barriers – for example, provide food, transportation, flexible meeting times, stipends, etc. The case of Vancouver-based organization BladeRunners shows the effectiveness of comprehensive off-the-job support (OECD, 2013). Participants are given the opportunity to choose 'program coordinators' who often have a history in the community and have encountered some of the same difficulties. By making coordinators available 24/7 to offer off-the-job assistance – everything from financial

support and meals to informal counselling – the organization effectively ensures that participants are able to maintain stable, long-term employment.

3. Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches.

A recent study found that youth in low-income Toronto neighbourhoods become NEET for reasons linked to their specific socio-economic circumstances (St. Stephen's House & Access Alliance, 2016). Organizations should recognize that youth face diverse labour market challenges, and design programs that are individualized, youth-centred, and flexible. This can mean adjusting program timing, considering the needs of different age groups, and promoting organizational diversity.

Organizations should ensure that programs are relevant to the lives of youth by promoting youth leadership and meaningfully involving participants in research, advocacy, and program planning (Koball et al., 2011). Consider broadening support for youth facing barriers by providing programs that target newcomers, Indigenous youth, racialized youth, youth who have left high school, youth with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ youth (YouthREX, 2016).

4. Make employers part of the solution.

Research suggests that employment initiatives without significant employer involvement are often not successful (OECD, 2013). Employers can provide job opportunities, training, as well as important information about hiring practices, entry requirements, and job structure. However, organizations should be careful to maintain a youth-centred approach and avoid reproducing employer-centred skill development programs that ignore the needs of youth participants.

Structured engagement with employers can also be an effective way to address discrimination that youth face in the labour market. Research suggests that community-based partners play a critical role in engaging employers and advocating for investments in youth, especially young men of colour (Bird & Okoh, 2016). In particular, organizations can communicate the benefits of hiring youth and offer supports to potential employers (CivicAction, 2014; Rockefeller Foundation, 2013; Youth Employment Strategy Task Force, 2016).

5. Connect youth with meaningful volunteer opportunities.

Research shows that youth who volunteer are less likely to become disconnected from education and employment (Jordan & Krumnow, 2014). Meaningful volunteer experiences can create 'opportunity pathways' toward positive educational, economic, and social outcomes by allowing youth to build skills, develop networks, and foster leadership qualities. However, marginalized young people often lack social networks that can facilitate access to meaningful volunteer work. Organizations should therefore consider investing in programs that connect

youth with volunteer opportunities that are best suited to their goals and interests.

6. Consider incorporating mentoring opportunities.

Research suggests that many NEET youth lack role models. Mentoring can expose youth to different career options, connections, and advice on how best to pursue employment opportunities (Youth Employment Strategy Task Force, 2016). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that “motivating young people can help them to recognize their personal and professional strengths, break out of old patterns of thinking, and realize that they can attain their goals” (2013, p. 31). Organizations should connect young people with mentors who genuinely care about their well-being and are able to raise their aspirations. In a study conducted by Yconic (2015), 71% of youth expressed interest in mentoring programs.

7. Focus on skill development.

Develop a long-term focus on skill development in order to ensure that youth can maintain their economic status. Focus on key areas such as social skills, communication skills, higher-order thinking, self-control, and positive self-concept (Bird & Okoh, 2016). Consider the use of cultural and creative activities, which can build skills while allowing youth to pursue a passion such as music, theatre, literature, and film. Conventionally seen as irrelevant to the labour market, creative pursuits can build confidence, raise young people’s ambitions, develop skills, and lead to entrepreneurship opportunities (OECD, 2013). Moreover, these kinds of activities are often more effective at engaging youth than conventional approaches.

8. Develop entrepreneurship support.

Evidence suggests that youth may not perceive entrepreneurship as a viable career option (House of Commons Committees, 2014; YouthREX, 2016). Young people pursuing an alternative to conventional employment might face financial constraints (such as high levels of debt), and be unaware of, or unable to access, government programs. Organizations can help support youth entrepreneurship by facilitating access to business advice, mentoring, and finance. Foster entrepreneurial skills by providing entrepreneurship programs that allow young people to apply their creativity, perseverance, self-confidence, and energy.

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