

Generation Work Briefing Paper

Young Adult Observations about Racial Discrimination

Introduction

Concerns over racial discrimination in the workplace were raised by many young adults enrolled in Generation Work. During 1:1 interviews 33 young adults identified their perceived employment barriers in different areas, including physical and mental health, labor market exclusion, childcare, human capital and essential skills/resources.

This briefing paper focuses on labor market exclusion connected to racial discrimination. On a list of 31 perceived barriers to employment, discrimination was the fourth highest mentioned concern of young adults. The majority (21 of 33) of the young adults in the interview pool were persons of color; 85% of whom identified racial discrimination as a barrier they would likely encounter when applying for a job.

Their reflections underscore the importance of embedding and advancing equity and inclusion approaches in hiring, training and employer engagement practices. Young adult feedback also sheds light on successful strategies that Generation Work partner staff from

Port Jobs, South Seattle College and others are using to counter discrimination by promoting young adult job skills, confidence and connections to employers and community partners who recognize their skills and stand ready to support their success.

What were young adult perceptions of racism and discrimination in their efforts to enter the labor force?

Many young adults had strong feelings about the role of discrimination in the job market. Some expected that they would be likely to experience discrimination when applying for jobs because *in their words* they may be:

- interviewed by racist employers who feel that people of color are not as productive as white employees;
- regarded as having attended poor high schools or other special programs where the training was not good;
- seen as not motivated to do a good job;
- perceived as living in environments that are chaotic, or unstable, and

subject to frequent work interruptions;

- assumed to not having been around people who are employed, or as not having good role models; and
- likely to be seen as not being as fast at learning new skills as white job applicants, or as requiring extra help in order to succeed in a job.

When discussing the above topics, it became clear that at least two-thirds of the young adults were basing their responses on the job seeking and employment experiences of siblings, parents, or other relatives, as well as their own lives.

Despite my skills and the good things I have to offer, what some employers may only see is that I am Black.

Three respondents (Hispanic, Honduran and Burmese) expanded upon their concerns about discrimination by citing a lack of language skills and concerns over immigration status as critical issues they faced. One young woman who described herself as a proud Latina woman said, "Some people my age [22] who are Hispanic want to participate in job programs, or look for work, but they know members of our ethnic group are under attack by the president, no matter what their citizenship status, and fear that drawing visibility to their families and friends, is not always a safe option."

She added that, "Some of my Mexican neighbors, including people who are legally in the United States, are convinced that United States employers only want to train and hire United States citizens. Also, they know from friends and neighbors that employers do not like dealing with the time it takes to review work authorization programs. And sometimes they are asked for their I-9 form, which should not even be required."

Young adults were vocal about and acutely aware of the high costs of discrimination to their future. At the same time they were quick to note that Generation Work partner strategies were aimed at addressing what one young adult called, "Our nation's crisis of bypassing or giving up on people just because of their race."

What kinds of strategies are Seattle Generation Work partners providing to help young adults confront racism and promote job access and success?

Young adults praised the services they were receiving from Port Jobs, South Seattle College and other Generation Work partners to help them become job ready and competitive. *In their words* the most effective strategies used by program staff to promote employment opportunities were:

- having staff that connected me to employers before I actually do an interview so that I already feel like someone is in my corner.

- taking time to help me identify, write down and describe my strengths and assets,
- working with me to talk about how the skills I am learning will benefit companies;
- emphasizing in job applications, and mock interviews that the skills that I have are what employers want;
- talking to me about my rights as an employee, and making sure I can stand up for myself;
- always encouraging me to develop short and future goals, and recognize the power I have to achieve them;
- helping me get connected to housing and other types of services;
- recognizing that I am making an effort, taking lots of busses, and going to tutoring, and doing what I need to in order to succeed;
- understanding and helping me describe how my background and culture makes a workforce stronger; and
- identifying employers who care, and have a history of hiring people from different language groups, religions and cultures.

They also said that programs, such as Airport Jobs, that have diverse staff that “come from the community but

are also deeply respected by employers are really great to have on your side – because they encourage you.” A similar benefit was identified by a young adult who was attending a class at South Seattle College. He was grateful that his instructor said, “Don’t worry. I will walk with you to the cement mason apprenticeship program (which is located on campus), introduce you, and you can talk about your training and interest in work. They want employees like you.”

Next Steps

SkillUp will share this report with Generation Work partners to identify where additional assistance and/or research is needed. Future reports will explore young adult post-employment discrimination experiences in more detail and include a greater focus on the effect of criminal justice involvement, affordable housing and basic math skills on employability. Feedback from young adults will continue to inform and lead the work. Young adult summaries of their assets and personal strengths will be featured, as will the racial equity and youth leadership strategies of Generation Work partners and employers.