



INSIGHTS SUMMARY

HOW CAN WE PREPARE EARLY-CAREER TALENT FOR A CHANGING WORLD OF WORK?

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THE ROUTE FROM UNIVERSITY TO A FIRST GOOD JOB IS BECOMING HARDER TO NAVIGATE. AI IS RESHAPING ENTRY-LEVEL ROLES AND INCREASING APPLICATION VOLUMES, WHILE EMPLOYERS OFTEN EXPECT EXPERIENCE THAT GRADUATES HAVE HAD LITTLE OPPORTUNITY TO GAIN. TECHNICAL SKILLS MATTER, BUT THEY DO NOT GUARANTEE ACCESS, PARTICULARLY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITHOUT PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS, WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE OR THE CONFIDENCE TO COMMUNICATE WHAT THEY CAN OFFER.

THIS WORKSHOP EXPLORED HOW EMPLOYERS, UNIVERSITIES AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATIONS CAN BRIDGE THIS GAP. FIVE PRIORITIES EMERGED: DEVELOPING THE SKILLS NEEDED TO SECURE, AS WELL AS DO, A JOB; MAKING RECRUITMENT FAIRER; PROVIDING CLARITY ABOUT AI; WIDENING ACCESS TO EXPERIENCE; AND BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS THAT CONNECT LEARNING MORE DIRECTLY TO OPPORTUNITY.

INSIGHT 1: **EQUIP GRADUATES WITH THE SKILLS, CONFIDENCE, NETWORKS AND EXPERIENCE TO SECURE A GOOD JOB**

Job-related technical skills are a starting point, not a complete pathway into employment. Graduates also need communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills, alongside the ability to explain their value. Braven combines skills development with networks, confidence and experience, including repeated opportunities to practise interviews and professional communication. COOP Careers brings together 'head, heart and hustle': in-demand technical capabilities, a supportive peer community and the practical skills needed to find work.

Social capital runs through both models. Employers can help build it by involving staff as mentors, coaches and mock interviewers. This engagement should be treated not only as volunteering, but also as an opportunity for employee learning and development.

"Talent is everywhere, access to opportunity is not. That's the gap we close."

Kilsys Payamps-Roure, Founding Executive Director, Braven New York City

INSIGHT 2: REDESIGN RECRUITMENT SO TALENT CAN STAND OUT FAIRLY

AI has made it easier to apply for jobs, producing large volumes of polished applications that often look alike. This makes it harder for graduates to differentiate themselves and for employers to identify potential.

Increasingly, employers are looking for interpersonal and critical-thinking skills, including judgement, curiosity, communication, imagination, and the ability to collaborate. Employers should examine how they assess these qualities without relying on personal connections or conventional credentials. Skills-based exercises, structured interviews and direct engagement through workshops or mock interviews can reveal potential that automated screening may miss. Recruitment processes and person requirements should be flexible enough to allow for those with non-traditional training or career paths to succeed where an applicant has the skills and potential for the role.

"The strongest partnerships are those that help bridge the talent-opportunity gap and unlock potential for the next generation."

Jamila Ritter, Vice President, Barclays

INSIGHT 3: GIVE GRADUATES CLEAR GUIDANCE ON HOW AI IS CHANGING WORK

AI fluency is becoming a baseline expectation, but technical familiarity alone will not distinguish early-career candidates. Graduates also need critical thinking, sound judgement and the ability to use AI responsibly. Universities and intermediary organisations should embed these capabilities into learning, while employers should explain how AI is affecting both roles and recruitment.

That transparency matters. Rather than simply seeing AI added to existing job descriptions, candidates need information on how roles are being redesigned, which uses of AI are encouraged, and which are inappropriate. The implications will differ by sector and geography, from changing corporate entry routes to new possibilities for entrepreneurship. Adoption of AI is not uniform across different regions, particularly where there are existing gaps in access to digital technology. Training must therefore respond to local labour markets rather than assume that one model will work everywhere.

"Today's conversation will demonstrate the power of partnership. By connecting education, workforce development, and industry, we can help ensure the next generation of leaders are prepared to succeed in a changing world of work."

Jamila Ritter, Vice President, Barclays

INSIGHT 4: REMOVE UNNECESSARY EXPERIENCE BARRIERS AND CREATE ACCESSIBLE WAYS TO GAIN IT

Entry-level vacancies requiring two or three years of experience create a circular barrier: graduates need experience to secure work, but need work to gain experience. These requirements can also deepen inequality when employers waive them for candidates with personal connections. Hiring managers should distinguish between what someone must know on their first day and what they can learn during their first 90 days.

Experience should not depend on unpaid internships, which exclude people who cannot afford to work without pay. Alternatives include paid placements, capstone projects, employer-led challenges, apprenticeships and project work embedded in courses. Once someone is hired, buddies and mentors can help them learn workplace norms, particularly when remote working limits informal learning.

"The NYU SPS and COOP data analytics certificate illustrates how higher education in collaboration with workforce development organizations can create academic opportunities that support student success."

Mary Killilea, Vice Dean of Academic Affairs and Innovation and Clinical Professor, NYU School of Professional Studies

INSIGHT 5: BUILD PARTNERSHIPS IN WHICH EACH ORGANISATION CONTRIBUTES ITS STRENGTHS

Universities, employers and workforce development organisations hold different pieces of the pathway into work. Universities can provide academic and technical learning, and are increasingly focused on graduate employability. Intermediaries can develop professional skills, confidence, peer networks and social capital. Employers can identify the skills that will be in demand, share current labour-market insight, offer practical experience and open routes into recruitment.

The NYU School of Professional Studies and COOP Careers data analytics certificate illustrates this complementarity by combining academic provision with career preparation and community. Such partnerships need a shared mission, regular communication and flexibility from each participant. They should also involve young people in their design and evaluation. Smaller employers may require additional support to participate, particularly when mentoring, placements or training place demands on limited organisational capacity.

"This morning's summit was a reminder that every sector at the table has a piece of the answer to the workforce moment we're in, and exactly why I'm energized by COOP's collaboration with NYU SPS to build a credential-to-career on-ramp."

Alex Barrett, Chief of Staff, COOP Careers

CONCLUSION

Bridging the gap between graduation and a first good job requires more than another training course. Employers need to examine the barriers embedded in recruitment, particularly unnecessary experience requirements, narrow credential criteria and processes that may overlook candidates from non-traditional backgrounds. Universities and intermediaries must connect technical learning with confidence, social capital and practical experience. Together, they need to give young people clearer guidance on AI and its effects on work.

Access remains the central challenge. Networks, experience and new technology can widen opportunity, but they can also reinforce existing unequal advantage. The next step is to build locally relevant partnerships that create transparent, affordable routes into work and support new employees through their critical first months.

RESOURCES

- Braven: A US nonprofit that works with universities and employers to equip college students with the skills, networks, confidence and experience they need to move successfully from higher education into strong first jobs.
<https://braven.org/>
- COOP Careers: A career acceleration programme supporting first-generation and low-income college graduates with technical and professional skills, peer networks, coaching and employer connections to help them secure strong early-career opportunities.
<https://www.coopcareers.org/>
- Team Europe Initiative on Opportunity-Driven Skills and Vocational Education and Training in Africa (TEI OP-VET): A Team Europe initiative that strengthens vocational education and training in Sub-Saharan Africa by linking skills development directly to employment opportunities emerging from investment and value-chain growth, with an emphasis on private-sector engagement and local ownership
https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/projects/tei-op-vet-team-europe-initiative-opportunity-driven-skills-and-vocational-education-and-training-africa_en
- Startup Discovery School: A programme focused on entrepreneurship and venture creation, supporting people to develop ideas, entrepreneurial capabilities and pathways towards creating businesses and employment opportunities <https://www.startupdiscoveryschool.com>
- Youth to Work Programme, Challenges Group: A youth employment and entrepreneurship programme operating across Ghana, Uganda and Zambia that places young people with SMEs to provide business development support, while building employability skills and helping participating businesses grow and create jobs.
<https://www.thechallengesgroup.com/case-studies/youth-to-work-program>
- IT Bridge Academy, Sightsavers: An inclusive digital-skills and employment programme helping young jobseekers with disabilities in Kenya build IT skills and compete more equally in the labour market, working with partners including Cisco and other public- and private-sector organisations.
<https://www.sightsavers.org/programmes/it-bridge-academy/>