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Strengthening “Soft” Skills for Workforce Success

Learning from the JP Morgan Chase & Co. Summer Youth Employment Program Evaluation

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JPMorgan Chase & Co. began a learning and evaluation practice of its summer youth employment program (SYEP) portfolio in 2022. At the time, the organization was providing grant support to 27 organizations that offer summer work-readiness training to young people between the ages of 14 and 24, including social service agencies, community-based organizations, and economic development agencies.

JPMorgan Chase partnered with MDRC to promote continual improvement among these organizations through research. MDRC collected data in the form of interviews and metrics aggregated from nearly all providers. Afterward, MDRC invited 10 providers to share specific insights about a particular program component — soft-skills training. (“Soft skills” refer to the general habits and competencies that make for an effective employee, such as arriving at work on time, cooperating with coworkers, taking and giving direction, communicating clearly, dressing appropriately for the workplace, and so forth.) These providers were selected for such reasons as tenure in the field, depth of training reported in previous interviews and surveys, and responsiveness to MDRC’s email outreach.

Six SYEP providers responded to the invitation and are highlighted in this brief.¹ The brief begins with an overview of the literature on the labor market value of soft skills, before explaining a particular type of labor market-advancement strategy: SYEPs. The brief then addresses how soft-skills training can be embedded successfully into the SYEP model and concludes with recommendations for the field. Ultimately, the findings presented in this brief are intended to showcase ways that soft-skills training, as a workforce development intervention, can put young people on the path to high-paying jobs and socio-economic advancement.

Literature on the Labor Market Returns to Soft-Skills Training

The world of work is changing rapidly. Automation, artificial intelligence, and other technological innovations are transforming the skills and experiences needed to secure jobs. At the same time, an increasing number of companies are struggling to fill positions and

are in turn deemphasizing college-degree requirements in their hiring practices.² Employers are looking for essential soft skills or work-readiness skills, including working collaboratively and communicating effectively, which cannot be automated.³ As of 2019, a third of required skills in all job postings were soft skills, and this proportion continues to grow.⁴ Soft skills are highly correlated with higher wages, job promotions, and improved professional performance.⁵ For young people from families with low incomes and for young people of color, signaling during the hiring process that they have acquired soft skills can potentially offset bias among employers and indicate an applicant's credibility.⁶

Despite the increasing importance of soft skills, employers report being less than confident about the soft skills of young people entering the workforce after high school and college.⁷ For young people, soft-skills training can happen in a variety of contexts — including in school, in community-based programs, in work-based learning opportunities such as internships, and in other early work experiences. However, research shows that young people, particularly students from low-income backgrounds, have limited access to opportunities that build soft skills.⁸ This lack of access puts them at a disadvantage, given the literature mentioned above that indicates these skills are linked to career advancement and the acquisition of high-paying jobs.

SYEPs as an Opportunity for Underserved Young People to Build Soft Skills

As purveyors of workforce training, SYEPs are in a good position to help young people gain soft skills. SYEPs are a workforce development model predicated on promoting socioeconomic advancement for young people ages 14 to 24 who often inhabit marginalized identities, such as being from low-income backgrounds, being young people of color, or being disconnected from school or the labor market. Often lasting six to eight weeks, SYEPs connect young people with paid, part-time work experiences. For many young people, SYEP work experiences are their first forays into workplaces outside of the retail or fast-food industries.

To help young people transition to the broader workforce after their time in SYEPs, providers often offer training in skills intended to help young people apply for jobs (for example, résumé writing and interview prep) and to succeed over the course of the summer experience (for example, skills in time management, communication, and teamwork). Soft-skills training is one of many interventions within SYEPs that seek to acclimate young people to professional environments. (Young people also benefit from on-the-job learning, coaching from workplace supervisors, and advising relationships with program staff members.)

Identifying Soft-Skills Training Best Practices

This section highlights best practices for implementing soft-skills training as observed among the SYEPs funded by JPMorgan Chase. The practices mentioned below are not an exhaustive list, nor do they represent what every SYEP may be capable of offering students, given varying program

budgets. However, the insights generated are still relevant demonstrations of what effective youth workforce preparation and skill building look like.

Soft Skills Covered in Work-Readiness Training

Across the SYEPs funded by JPMorgan Chase, popular areas for training are related to professional development (résumé writing, interview prep, and the art of networking); interpersonal skills (effective communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork); and life skills (hygiene, dress, time management, and self-care). For the purposes of MDRC's analysis, all of these are categorized as "soft skills." Within the broader pool of SYEPs, soft-skills training varies in length and can last as little as half a day. However, the six providers interviewed each offer about one to four weeks of formal soft-skills training over the course of the summer.

How Training Is Deployed

Among these six providers, most start the summer with an orientation week and offer additional training days throughout the experience. A few providers have relationships with schools that allow them to provide additional training during the school year — but this arrangement is not common.

Summer training occurs in a group setting, often facilitated by one or more instructors who work from a curriculum. Lessons usually begin with a lecture and are followed by group discussions to help young people engage with the material. Instructors remark that providing real-world examples of scenarios that young people will encounter at work are particularly useful. For example, YouthForce NOLA and Futures and Options present fictional situations that young people may encounter (for example, being asked to work late or receiving criticism from supervisors) to help them prepare responses in advance.

Training activities can occur both in-person and online. Some instructors note that young people tend to be more engaged when face-to-face with their instructor(s) and peers. Some providers break young people into smaller groups who move through the training together, especially if young people enter with markedly different levels of work experience. Training activities tend to be either highly encouraged or mandatory. However, a few providers indicate that making training optional is one way to reduce barriers for young people, who may have other financial or familial obligations that limit their ability to attend — especially if training is unpaid.

Provider Perspectives on the Value of Soft-Skills Training

Helping Young People Acclimate to Workplace Norms

The six SYEPs interviewed are entry-level occupational training providers that proceed from the assumption that the young people they serve do not have previous professional workplace exposure. They report implementing soft-skills training curricula at the request of employers, who expect young people to enter the workplace with knowledge of a code of norms related to behavior, dress, and communication that is not taught in schools and that may put young people from middle- and high-income backgrounds at a competitive advantage.

Program staff members help young people meet these unspoken expectations, teaching them skills such as email etiquette, how to create a résumé and LinkedIn page, how to receive comments on their performance without being defensive, and how to close out an internship professionally. Where applicable, providers compare behaviors acceptable at school — a known context — with those acceptable at work. For example, Youth Action Project (YAP) teaches that punctuality is paramount in both places but that jeans do not conform with a business casual dress code. Young people then have the opportunity to dress in their business clothes and hear from YAP’s staff on the suitability of their attire.

Providers report, anecdotally, that employers have responded positively to the training, telling them that young people trained by SYEPs carry themselves noticeably differently than do other young people. The implication is that soft-skills training helps young people telegraph “professionalism” to employers through adherence to workplace norms related to such subjects as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork. For this reason, providers say that teaching soft skills is a long-term investment that will help young people succeed in future professional experiences, including leadership roles.

Empowering Young People to Advocate for Themselves and Get Their Needs Met

Beyond helping young people make a good impression on others, providers help them find ways to make the professional world “work” for them. For example, Newark One-Stop trains young people to handle stress in the workplace by creating personal self-care plans for days when they feel overwhelmed. Other providers introduce young people to strategies for resolving conflicts amicably in the workplace, using reasoned arguments to advocate for themselves instead of emotional displays. Several providers help young people identify their interests, aptitudes, and values, and assess to what extent their summer work experiences are aligned with those. If young people find that they are working mainly on unaligned tasks, providers share how to ask for more meaningful work from employers in ways that will signal a desire for growth rather than just dissatisfaction.

Growing Young People’s Professional Confidence

According to program staff members, young people exposed to robust soft-skills training demonstrate gains in confidence. At YAP, surveys administered before and after the program show a 20 percent gain in young people’s confidence in their ability to interview for well-paying jobs. At Eight Million Stories, staff members say that young people report diminished shyness and self-doubt after they complete the program. Providers postulate that these gains in confidence can be attributed to two factors. First, providers encourage young people to adopt a “growth mindset” during training — the belief that one can improve with effort. Adopting that perspective means that perceived setbacks — such as arriving late to work or receiving criticism from an employer — are reframed as learning opportunities. Second, SYEP training is community oriented, which allows young people to benefit from the support of peers who can validate their experiences and help them feel that they “belong” in professional enclaves. This observation is noteworthy given scholarship showing that people from historically marginalized groups tend to experience feelings of inadequacy at work that belie their true abilities.⁹

Gains in confidence are anecdotal evidence reported by program providers, whose accounts may differ from young people’s firsthand testimonies. Furthermore, it can be hard to correlate gains

in confidence entirely with soft-skills training, which is one piece of the SYEP model that exists alongside real-world work experience and mentorship from employers and program staff members. For the purposes of this brief, MDRC relies on providers' perceptions of how soft-skills training may buoy young people's professional confidence and sense of workforce preparation.

Recommendations to Enhance Soft-Skills Training

The six SYEPs interviewed offer soft-skills training that is relatively comprehensive, at a level that may not be feasible for the broader pool of providers to offer given resource constraints. However, these models offer lessons that can be instructive to the wider field of providers.

- **Training quality is linked to resources:** These six providers spend a week or two on training, but it is not uncommon for other providers with fewer resources to spend as little as half a day on training. However, providers across the board, including those that are already offering more intensive training, voice the desire to spend even more time training young people. Their logic is that SYEPs tend to serve marginalized young people and that increased training time is one way to help them achieve greater parity with their more privileged peers. Simultaneously, the intensive providers note that they, too, are bound by finite time and program budgets. Some have found workarounds — such as embedding staff members in schools to jump-start young people's professional learning, as Boston Private Industry Council does, or starting summer training earlier, as Eight Million Stories plans to do. Ultimately, training intensity is limited by resource constraints, and it remains up to providers to determine what percentage of funding to allocate to this domain relative to other necessary expenditures.
- **Making training accessible and providing incentives for participation:** Program staff members share that, in the absence of incentives or other allowances, young people may perceive training as burdensome. YAP provides a certificate of completion and culmination stipend to young people who receive a score of 90 percent when tested on their soft-skills training. YouthForce NOLA, Newark One-Stop, and Eight Million Stories pay young people at or near minimum wage to participate in training so that they do not have to take on additional jobs to survive. A few providers voice that making attendance optional whenever possible can increase young people's likelihood of completing a program.
- **Seeking industry contributions whenever possible:** Providers share that employers' professional expectations were a major impetus in the creation of soft-skills training. Yet few programs report including employers in the curriculum-development process — although several ask employers to complete exit surveys assessing young people's workplace performance. Involving employers may be a valuable opportunity to refine curricula, especially in a changing labor market. It may prove challenging, however, to engage employers in these efforts, which is the topic of an earlier brief.¹⁰
- **Finding ways to take advantage of peer communities in training:** Providers indicate that training is more fruitful when young people are engaged in group discussion and form bonds with their peers. The community aspect of training can increase young people's sense of belonging in

professional environments and confidence. Providers name in-person training sessions and smaller group sizes as ways to encourage community building alongside learning.

Conclusion

Interviews with six notable soft-skills training providers demonstrate best practices for preparing young people for professional workplaces. The skills taught are not industry-specific, which providers name as an advantage in preparing young people for future work experiences. Commonly cited skills include how to communicate and dress in the workplace and how to resolve conflict amicably. Soft-skills training in SYEPs, when well executed, may help disadvantaged young people compete more equitably for jobs with their more privileged peers – who often benefit from social networks that can transmit professional advantages to them (such as knowledge of workplace customs). However, future research is needed to investigate the impacts of soft-skills training on young people’s outcomes over time.¹¹

It is understandable why many providers may not be able to offer more intensive training due to limited budgets, time, and personnel. Increasing instructional time and paying young people salaries for soft-skills training would require programs to reduce spending on other important domains. To strengthen soft-skills training and other essential program components, SYEPs are likely to need stronger private-sector and philanthropic support.

Notes and References

- 1 The SYEP providers interviewed for this brief span the country. They are: [Eight Million Stories](#), [The Boston Private Industry Council](#), [Futures and Options](#), [Newark Youth One-Stop Career Center](#), [Youth Action Project](#), and [YouthForce NOLA](#).
- 2 Kelsey Schaberg, “Teaching Soft Skills in Workforce Programs: Findings from WorkAdvance Providers” (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2019).
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- 6 Sara B. Heller and Judd B. Kessler, “Soft Skills in the Youth Labor Market,” *American Economic Association* 112 (2022): 121–125; Parker Cellura and Marco Lepe, “What Do Employers Want to See from Soft-Skills Credentials?” *The Future of Career and Technical Education*, September (<https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/what-do-employers-want-see-soft-skills-credentials>, 2022).
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