

# CAREER EXPLORATION FOR NEW YORK CITY'S YOUNG PEOPLE:

From "Generation Recession" to  
Long-Term Self-Sufficiency

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For too many young people—New York City youth in particular—the 21st century has not been a time of prosperity. Dubbed "Generation Recession," these 16-24 year olds have graduated—or, given the city's public school on-time completion rate of around 50%, in many cases not graduated—into an economic environment with few opportunities. Nationally, this group suffered nearly one-third of all job losses between 2007 and 2009, and their actual rate of participation in the labor market has dropped to its lowest level since the federal government began collecting statistics in 1948. Today, one in four young people who want to work have been unable to find jobs, and roughly one-third of those lucky enough to secure employment consider themselves underemployed—they would gladly take on more hours or responsibility given the chance.<sup>1</sup>

New York City has been at the epicenter of the opportunity gap for young people. The city's manufacturing base, a pathway to the middle class for generations of low-skilled, low-educated workers, has all but vanished. The retail, clerical and trades jobs that have emerged in their place typically require, at minimum, a high school diploma or GED for consideration, but in many cases are being filled by adults with more education and experience. Fewer than one in six New York City teenagers are actually employed and nearly 40% who want to work cannot find a job. The impact has fallen hardest on inner city African-American and Latino youth, whose unemployment rate often doubles that of their white counterparts. Indeed, a young black male high school dropout faces a higher chance of being incarcerated than employed on any given day.<sup>2</sup>

Growing up in this limited environment, many young people have all but abandoned hope. Nearly a quarter million young New Yorkers are entirely disconnected from work, education and training. Most young people experience sporadic employment and often have only vague notions about their eventual career paths, but workforce organizations find that their disconnected participants often cannot identify for themselves a single realistic occupation beyond entry-level jobs.<sup>3</sup>

## TRY THIS: Six Degrees of Career Exploration

The "six degrees of separation" theory holds that everyone can be connected to any other person through a chain of "a friend of a friend" statements in six steps or fewer. The same can also be said about employment. Few first jobs turn into careers. Yet the skills and experience gained in those first jobs can be valuable in eventually moving up the career ladder.

Give teams of participants two completely unrelated job titles, with ten minutes to figure out a realistic pathway between the two jobs. The only steps possible are 1. a worker can move up in the same organization, or 2. a worker can switch to a similar job in a different type of organization.

See an example on the following page >>

So how can workforce practitioners shift focus from "for now" jobs to get young people not only thinking about but actually excited to explore career opportunities? How do they convey the importance of a career as a lifelong, evolving process that leverages experience, skills, and relationships in order to rise from one level to the next? Below are seven strategies to make career planning a priority in your program.

### STRATEGY # 1: UNDERSTAND THE REAL CHALLENGE TO CAREER PLANNING FOR MANY YOUNG NEW YORKERS

The world is filled with men and women who have risen from humble backgrounds to overcome significant barriers and find success in their chosen fields. Meanwhile, their compatriots from the same neighborhoods facing the same challenges and (lack of) resources remain trapped in poverty and obscurity. The million dollar question is, what enables one person to seize opportunity while others can't or won't?

Two pernicious, intermingled forces mire many at-risk youth in mediocrity. Those who see few adults going to work every day may suffer a poverty of imagination about the future. Lacking positive role models, they have a hard time imagining themselves as doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, electricians, or in other skilled occupations. Intensifying this sense of disempowerment, the soft tyranny of low expectations directed at many poor youth—an unspoken but clearly received message that others believe the youth is unable to accomplish much, an absence of encouragement to embrace challenges—dampens their belief in their own potential. Tracked into special education classes, ignored or overly punished for negative behavior, never pushed to achieve more than they think they can, they soon internalize a self-image as someone who cannot compete in the "regular" world.

For some youth, then, career planning must actually begin with the breaking down of this sense of defeatism and an opening up of horizons. Youth development principles recognize the importance of fostering relationships between youth and caring adults who can mentor and guide them, and of actively engaging young people in their own development. Unstinting encouragement and optimism from staff, positive visual images of people engaged in various occupations, and guest presentations by successful individuals who overcame similar barriers can all help normalize the idea of employment as a realistic and achievable pathway to a better life.

### STRATEGY #2: LIGHT A FIRE OF URGENCY TO GRAB YOUNG PEOPLE'S ATTENTION

Today's labor market differs greatly from that faced by earlier generations. Following the lead of factory jobs, many occupations once thought safe have shed workers through automation and outsourcing. As detailed in the excellent video *Did You Know 2.0* ([shifthappens.wikispaces.com](http://shifthappens.wikispaces.com)), the emergence of India and China as economic superpowers and the opening of eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union has created a global supply of highly skilled, inexpensive labor. Simultaneously, the rise of the Internet and increasingly sophisticated technology has enabled tasks of all sorts—from financial analysis to drive-thru ordering—to be centralized in lower cost locations. (Even New York City's iconic doormen are not safe. In an increasing number of the city's residential buildings, companies like Cyberdoorman now use remote monitoring to replace expensive lobby staff.) Almost every job that absolutely does not need to be done on-site will eventually face competitive pressure to cut costs by shifting elsewhere or reducing wages. With occupations evolving, dying off, or being created at dizzying speeds, workers must become more flexible to thrive in the new labor market. Today's young people are predicted to hold ten to fourteen jobs before they reach middle age. Employers will value and reward workers who have the ability to continually learn and adapt, while those who stagnate will find themselves unable to land higher paying positions—or shut out altogether.<sup>4</sup>

### Six Degrees of Career Exploration Example:

Movie Theater Usher to Master Beekeeper in five easy steps:

1. Movie Theater Usher → to Movie Theater Ticket Taker
2. Movie Theater Ticket Taker → Zoo Ticket Taker
3. Zoo Ticket Taker → Exhibition Assistant, Zoo's Entomology Department
4. Exhibition Assistant, Entomology Dept. → Assistant Beekeeper
5. Assistant Beekeeper → Master Beekeeper

Each group presents its career ladder, and the group(s) with the most creative (but realistic) path in six moves or fewer wins a prize. Emphasize the flexibility of pathways that people can take to reach their goals.



### STRANGE EARLY JOBS OF FAMOUS PEOPLE

The exercise below is a great way to get young people thinking about careers, as even celebrities start out with less-than-glamorous jobs.

Have participants match the following famous people with the job they worked before hitting it big.

#### CELEBRITY

1. Beyonce Knowles

2. Bill Cosby

3. Colin Powell

4. Edgerrin James

5. Gwen Stefani

6. James Brown

7. Kanye West

8. Ozzy Osbourne

9. Queen Latifah

10. Russell Simmons

11. Snoop Dogg

12. Whoopi Goldberg

#### EARLY JOB

A. Bricklayer

B. Swept up hair at a salon

C. Slaughterhouse worker

D. Grocery bagger

E. Worked at Orange Julius

F. Worked at Burger King

G. Baby furniture store clerk

H. Racked balls at a pool hall

I. Shoe shiner

J. Mopped floors at a Dairy Queen

K. Loaded watermelons into a truck sixteen hours a day

L. Worked at the Gap

#### ANSWERS:

1-b; 2-i; 3-g; 4-k; 5-j; 6-h; 7-l; 8-c; 9-f; 10-e; 11-d; 12-a

### SUPERVISOR'S NOTE #1: Setting the Tone about Career Exploration

Career exploration, done right, is difficult for workforce organizations, when funding rewards immediate job placement and short-term retention over long-term planning. Young people themselves often resist career exploration activities, more intent on "for now" jobs that put money in the pocket quickly. Dedication to career planning, though, lies at the heart of the workforce development mission: to provide the tools, resources and opportunities that enable participants to achieve long-term self-sufficiency.



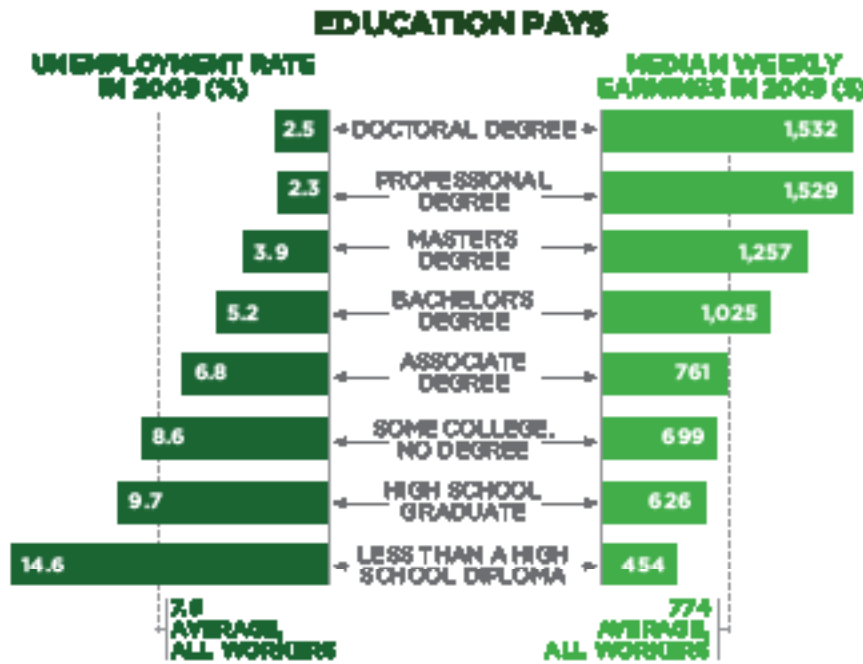
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### STRATEGY #3: WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE?

Few items resonate as profoundly with young people as money. For those not primarily driven by other passions, such as a desire to help others or to pursue a particular interest, money can play a significant role in choosing a career. Money, to paraphrase Gordon Gekko, clarifies, cuts through, and captures, the essence of the career exploration process.

Young people may have only a vague sense of the impact of education or training on earnings. While not everyone needs a bachelor's degree to land a well paying job, post-secondary preparation is a "smart" investment that will pay off for decades. On average, someone with a bachelor's degree takes home nearly twice that of someone with just a high school diploma—a premium that translates into well over a million dollars in extra earnings over a lifetime! Educational attainment also reduces the likelihood of becoming unemployed.



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey

Solid employment is critical in a high cost city like New York. According to government statistics, a single adult working full-time in New York City needs to earn nearly \$12 per hour in order to cover basic expenses without outside assistance, while a single parent must bring in almost \$20 per hour—figures that almost any NYC resident would say are probably too low! With New York City's astronomical cost of living, minimum wage work simply doesn't cut it.

Hourly Wages	1 Adult	1 Adult, 1 Child	2 Adults	2 Adults, 1 Child	2 Adults, 2 Children
Living Wage	\$11.86	\$19.66	\$16.29	\$24.10	\$30.30
Poverty Wage	\$5.04	\$6.68	\$6.49	\$7.81	\$9.83
Minimum Wage	\$7.25	\$7.25	\$7.25	\$7.25	\$7.25

Source: Penn State University Living Wage Calculator: [www.livingwage.geog.psu.edu](http://www.livingwage.geog.psu.edu)

### TRY THIS: Show Them The Money!

Few jobs open to youth pay above the living wage, and options remain limited for adults who have not attained some form of post-secondary education or training. Young people often look at employment as a gateway to a certain lifestyle. They may not understand, though, which careers will provide the money they want. New York CareerZone's "Dollars & Sense" tool ([www.nycareerzone.org](http://www.nycareerzone.org)) allows visitors to enter their estimated monthly expenses and then shows occupations that pay above that amount—often a real wake-up call!



### STRATEGY #4: UNDERSTAND THE TRENDS—WHERE WILL THE JOBS BE IN THE FUTURE?

The news is not all bad for today's youth. In a knowledge-based economy, those who develop specialized skills sets through education and training can do very well. More significantly, new opportunities will open up to all young people as the American labor force changes in the coming decades. The escalating retirement of the "baby boom" generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) will create significant shortages of workers in key fields that do not necessarily require a four year college degree. Two valuable resources can help young New Yorkers understand the industries and specific occupations that are likely to thrive.

The Center for an Urban Future's 2006 report, *Chance of a Lifetime*, has identified seven industries in New York City with anticipated job growth, modest entry qualifications, and plentiful career opportunities projected for at least the next decade.

#### THESE INCLUDE:

- **AVIATION.** With three major airports in the New York City area and another planned for development, there will be significant need for a host of workers ranging from baggage handlers to air traffic controllers.
- **AUTOMOTIVE MAINTENANCE.** Thought of largely as a mass-transit city, New York is also home to more than one million automobiles, taxi cabs, vans, trucks and busses. With automotive technology growing ever more complex, many of today's mechanics simply do not have the skills to fix the vehicles of tomorrow.
- **COMMERCIAL DRIVING.** New York City's population is expected to grow by over one million new residents by 2030, boosting demand for food, clothing and every other type of good—all of which requires delivery by truck or van.
- **CONSTRUCTION.** With a growing population, long neglected infrastructure needs, and miles of prime waterfront property ripe for redevelopment, New York City's construction workforce—highly unionized and rapidly aging—is poised for significant growth.
- **HEALTH CARE.** Already the largest sector in New York City, the demand for health care will continue expanding as the population ages and health care reform extends coverage to hundreds of thousands of additional residents. With job opportunities at every skill level, health care is a field with many routes for career advancement.
- **SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY.** Home to major universities and Fortune 500 companies, New York City has made a substantial push in recent years to attract science and technology jobs. Ranging from residential and business computer support to cable network installation to lab technicians, these well paying jobs will reward workers willing to undergo continual training and certification.
- **SPECIALIZED MANUFACTURING.** While most manufacturing has long disappeared from the five boroughs, the factories that remain generally pay premium wages to workers who can operate complex machinery to create high quality products.

Complementing the *Chance of a Lifetime* findings, the New York City Labor Market Information Service's In-Demand Occupations list ([www.nyc.gov/wib](http://www.nyc.gov/wib)), updated every two years, identifies occupations that are expected to

### SUPERVISOR'S NOTE #2: Managing Expectations

Staff who provide career services must balance participants' short, medium, and long-term needs with the program's outcome requirements. Discussions about futures often get sacrificed to immediate concerns and placement pressures. Encourage staff to dedicate more than passing attention to career planning. The work they do in opening up the world of possibilities will have lasting impact on participants, and will likely be what the young people remember about your program years later.





grow or remain stable, require modest education and training, and pay above average. As a bonus, the occupations on this list are also the only ones for which anyone over the age of 18 can apply for an Individual Training Grant (ITG) through a Workforce1 Career Center ([www.nyc.gov/workforce1](http://www.nyc.gov/workforce1)) to underwrite the cost of approved training programs, making them extremely attractive options.

### STRATEGY # 5: USE TECHNOLOGY TO KEEP YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGED

Boring career exploration workbooks have become relics in the digital age. Spice up your workshops by tapping into the wealth of free, interactive resources available online. Below are six useful websites, each full of multimedia career exploration tools:

- **NEW YORK CAREERZONE**, designed specifically for youth, makes career exploration and planning fun and easy. CareerZone provides information on 800 occupations from the national Occupational Information Network (O\*NET) database; the latest labor market information from the state Department of Labor; and interactive middle and high school career portfolios aligned with the NYS Education Department Career Plan initiative. Links to college exploration and planning resources, and over 450 career videos bring careers to life: [www.nycareerzone.org](http://www.nycareerzone.org)
- **CAREERONESTOP**, a U.S. Department of Labor-sponsored website, offers comprehensive career resources and workforce information to job seekers, students, businesses, and workforce professionals: [www.careeronestop.org](http://www.careeronestop.org)
- **AMERICA'S CAREER INFONET** features user-friendly occupation and industry information, salary data, career videos, education resources, self-assessment tools, career exploration assistance, and other resources: [www.CareerInfoNet.org](http://www.CareerInfoNet.org)
- **10 GOODMINUTES—CAREER ADVICE FOR YOUNG PROFESSIONALS** offers a weekly series of 10-minute podcasts created at Cornell University that provide career strategies and advice to young professionals. Many of the podcasts focus on career exploration: [www.10goodminutes.com](http://www.10goodminutes.com)
- **HUMANMETRICS JUNG TYPOLOGY TEST** generates a four letter Myers-Briggs code that can provide young people with insights into their fundamental personality, such as where they get their mental energy, how they like to interact with others, how they collect and process information, and the amount of structure they prefer. Numerous inexpensive books with titles like *Do What You Are*, *50 Best Jobs for Your Personality*, and *The Career Within You* connect personality type to career exploration and workplace success: [www.humanmetrics.com](http://www.humanmetrics.com)
- **CASEY LIFE SKILLS** is a suite of comprehensive online assessments, learning plans, and resources developed initially to engage foster care youth but applicable to all. The assessments consist of statements about life skills domains, including career exploration, deemed critical for successful adult living: [www.caseylifeskills.org](http://www.caseylifeskills.org)

### STRATEGY #6: SOCIAL NETWORKING = SOCIAL CAPITAL = POSSIBLE CAREER CONTACTS

As sociologist Malcolm Gladwell notes, it's not just who or how many people you know, but also how many people really like you and want to help you along.<sup>7</sup> Career exploration is as much about networking as taking assessment tests and reading occupational descriptions. Many still learn about jobs and career paths the "old-fashioned way," through acquaintances willing to provide mentorship and share their experiences.

### TRY THIS: Career Exploration in the 21st Century

Young people spend a lot of time online. Tap their fluency with digital tools for career exploration. Assign groups a different occupation and give them 30 minutes to create a PowerPoint presentation incorporating the following information about their assigned occupation:

- One YouTube video on the occupation
- Work description and education or training required from the Occupational Outlook Handbook ([www.bls.gov/oco/](http://www.bls.gov/oco/))
- Starting, median, and top wages, and decade growth prospects in NYC ([www.labor.ny.gov/stats/](http://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/))
- Three New York training or education programs ([www.nycareerzone.org](http://www.nycareerzone.org))
- Website of one relevant trade association or union



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Help young people identify individuals whom they might contact for informational interviews. Someone in their current networks of friends and relations might be able to facilitate an introduction for them. If they can't think of anyone, encourage them to create an account on LinkedIn to start building professional relationships. They can also call relevant companies, trade associations, and professional organizations until they find someone willing to share their time. Volunteer services like New York Cares ([www.newyorkcares.org](http://www.newyorkcares.org)) and NYC Service ([www.nycservice.org](http://www.nycservice.org)) can help arrange career fairs at workforce programs, bringing in professionals to discuss their fields. People are surprisingly inclined to talk with eager young people about their jobs.

### STRATEGY #7: CREATE A ROADMAP

*"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." —Confucius*

Careers feel much more possible when young people are given a sense of what each step along the way might look like, what the work environments might be like, and what skills and training they might need. Some workforce agencies, trade associations and other employment entities develop visual maps to illustrate pathways within different sectors or industries. (Michigan Works!, a Midwestern nonprofit, has examples of graphically rich career ladder handouts on its website at [www.michiganworks.com](http://www.michiganworks.com).) The US Dept. of Labor's Competency Model Clearinghouse tool ([www.careeronestop.org/competencymodel/](http://www.careeronestop.org/competencymodel/)) allows users to input information about and arrange different jobs to create career ladder handouts specific to their situation and location.<sup>8</sup>

### IN SUM

Most of us have changed jobs and careers multiple times. We should not expect that young people will know with any certainty what they want to do for the next fifty years, or that their current plans will not change. Exploration and creativity are key to engaging young people as they consider their futures. Stimulate the discussion by encouraging them to consider as many options as possible. Create a sense of urgency and use money to grab their attention. Tap into social networking tools, interactive online resources and fun competitions to keep them engaged. Show them realistic, concrete roadmaps to get from where they are today to where they want to be. Using these approaches, we can help young people make practical career choices that will keep them out of the revolving door of unemployment and low-wage work, and set them on the pathway to success.

<sup>1</sup>Lizzy Ratner, "Generation Recession," *The Nation*, Nov. 4, 2009, [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com)

<sup>2</sup>2009 New York City Teenage Labor Force Participation Rate and Unemployment Rate figures based on unpublished data from the Current Population Survey provided by the New York State Dept. of Labor; Jennifer Steinhauer, "That Guy Flipping Burgers Is No Kid Anymore," *The New York Times*, March 27, 2005, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com); Sam Dillon, "Study Finds High Rate of Imprisonment Among Dropouts," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2009, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

<sup>3</sup>New York City's Young Adult Task Force, *The Time Is Now: Implementing One System for New York City's Emerging Workforce*, 2005, [www.jobsfirstnyc.org/relatedpublications.php](http://www.jobsfirstnyc.org/relatedpublications.php)

<sup>4</sup>Thomas L. Friedman's *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (2005), required reading for all career advisors, details the forces reshaping the global labor market and their implications for emerging workers; Catherine Holahan, "It's Carlton, Your Cyber Doorman," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, June 12, 2007, [www.businessweek.com](http://www.businessweek.com)

<sup>5</sup>Glamorati, "Before They Were Stars: 50 Celebrity First Jobs," March 25, 2008, [www.glamorati.com](http://www.glamorati.com); Ethan Trex, "Strange Early Jobs of 23 Famous People," *CNN*, May 29, 2009, [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com)

<sup>6</sup>David Jason Fischer, *Chance of a Lifetime*, 2006, [www.nycfuture.org](http://www.nycfuture.org)

<sup>7</sup>Malcolm Gladwell, "Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg," *The New Yorker*, Jan. 11, 1999, [www.gladwell.com](http://www.gladwell.com)

<sup>8</sup>For additional information on creating career ladder models, see the California Employment Development Department, *Careers Under Construction - Models for Developing Career Ladders*, 2003, [www.calmis.ca.gov](http://www.calmis.ca.gov). The NYCLMIS has produced a number of industry overviews that can be helpful in creating New York City-specific career ladders: [www.nyc.gov/wib](http://www.nyc.gov/wib).

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