MSPWin
Centering the
VOICE
of the Underestimated
Job Seeker

Insights Report Prepared in Partnership by:
Imagine Deliver & Juxtaposition Arts
Overview

Prepared by Imagine Deliver and Juxtaposition Arts

Insights From Workforce Leaders

Underestimated job seekers need a customized and humanizing experience. Underestimated job seekers are bursting with resilience, but they shouldn’t have to be.

The workforce pipeline must start earlier. How to change it alone? Leaders know it, but they don’t know how to change it alone. The system is stuck and workforce leaders hold (almost all of) the power.

Employers hold (almost all of) the power.

The workforce system values processes and products over people.
Your Guide to This Report

3 Insights From Job Seekers

Eliminating the box and humanizing the process.

Healthy workplaces are built on healthy relationships.

Independence and interdependence are both integral to finding fulfilling employment.

4 Strategies for Action

Eliminate the box altogether.

Carve space for growth.

Invest in healthy workplaces.

Eliminate hidden traps in processes.

Value job seekers’ life experiences as solutions.

Instead of talking about promising practices, incentivize workforce leaders to implement them.

Learn from and elevate small, anti-racist models.
From July to September 2019, MSPWin worked with Imagine Deliver (a local consulting firm delivering equity-centered design) and Juxtaposition Arts (a social enterprise nonprofit that combines art, design, education and youth empowerment to amplify community voice) to listen to underestimated job seekers and those who serve them to better understand how to elevate and invest in solutions that truly place underestimated job seekers as central, valued users of the workforce system.

**MSPWin**
Role: to design and implement a solution for a better Minnesota workforce system

**Imagine Deliver**
Role: to lift up the expertise and best ideas of leaders in workforce sectors

**Juxtapostion Arts**
Role: to amplify the voices of the underestimated job seekers
Who does MSPWin count as an underestimated* job seeker?

- 18 years or older
- Located in Minneapolis or St. Paul, MN
- Identify as indigenous, black, and/or people of color
- Considered to be the least able to find work (which can include individuals connected to other systems, such as those who have been in foster care or those who have been previously incarcerated)

*For the purposes of this report, Imagine Deliver is using the term “underestimated” instead of “underserved” or “marginalized” as an intentional choice; job seekers have an abundance of overlooked and in-demand qualities that have not been celebrated or utilized by the workforce system.
The overarching objective of MSPWin’s community learning initiative was to learn directly from job seekers and racially reflective leaders working in the workforce development field in order to design funding priorities that “center” job seekers who identify as indigenous, black or people of color (IBPOC) and to eliminate disparities in wealth in Minnesota.

Beyond inviting underestimated job seekers to share their input and insights on the barriers they face, and their unique solutions for a better Minnesota workforce system, the definition of success for MSPWin’s engagement process included the following:

- MSPWin gains valuable insights from the people it wants to serve better;
- Community engagement centers the job seeker as defined above;
- MSPWin identifies potential partners across the Twin Cities;
- MSPWin creates a framework for an actionable step forward that centers the voice of the job seeker in the field of workforce development.

To do this, Imagine Deliver and JXTA spoke with more than 80 people—both job seekers and workforce leaders from the nonprofit, private, and public sectors—who shared their solutions for the workforce system.

Here’s what we learned from them...
INSIGHTS FROM WORKFORCE LEADERS
Imagine Deliver’s Methods
Who We Talked to and Why

Imagine Deliver hosted three focus groups designed to lift up the expertise and best ideas of leaders in the workforce sector through three activities. Specific, targeted outreach and invitations went out to the following groups—Equity Works Leadership Institute: Workforce cohort, Workforce Next, Greater Metro Workforce Council, Minnesota Employment Services Consortium and DEED Equity Accelerator cohort—with special attention to racially reflective leaders working in the workforce field. In the first activity, discussion group participants shared ideas silently through writing. In the second two activities, workforce leaders shared ideas through small-group discussion and through a table conversation that included every participant in the session.
Top Insights We Learned from Workforce Leaders

Prepared by Imagine Deliver

1. Underestimated job seekers need a customized and humanizing experience.

2. Underestimated job seekers are bursting with resilience, but they shouldn’t have to be.

3. The workforce system values processes and products over people.

4. Employers hold (almost all of) the power.

5. The system is stuck and workforce leaders know it, but they don’t know how to change it alone.

6. The workforce pipeline must start earlier.
Underestimated job seekers need a customized and humanizing experience.

Workforce leaders desire flexible funding dollars and multidimensional solutions that allow them to uniquely “meet people where they’re at.” Helping people find a successful path toward meaningful employment requires an approach that recognizes the diversity of experiences, barriers and challenges that job seekers face. No two paths toward a career are the same, and likewise, no one strategy or solution will work for everyone. Flexibility is key to serving job seekers better, yet many leaders in the nonprofit and government sectors said few resources exist that give them the freedom to serve job seekers as well as they would like.

“MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY’RE AT.”
“There isn’t one singular solution, and you have to have a multidimensional approach to meet people where they’re at. So I would elevate the effective practice for each one of those things [i.e. the different people organizations serve like disconnected youth, older workers, those on public assistance] and share that knowledge broadly. Don’t make it territorial. Share it democratically, and then find unique funding dedicated to each of those best practices. Barrier reduction looks different for each person, so we need flexible dollars to say that [I can use my] 20 percent support service dollar budget on the down payment assistance and first month’s rent for 10 families that need it because that’s what’s going to stabilize that family. So release some of the crazy restrictions that have been created for good reason. We have to loosen those restrictions and trust people. In the support service arena, people are given money to do whatever they need to do, and no one asks what it’s going to be used it for. It’s because they trust people and trust that they know what they need. This isn’t about misuse; it’s about putting people in the driver’s seat of what they need to remove barriers and stabilize their family.”

-Workforce Leader
“People need help where they’re at. Being ready to be in the workforce is not about being able to do the work. It’s about being able to get to work on time, and it’s about what’s going on in their lives at home. Being able to solve barriers can really start with some emotional intelligence support/education and counseling because everyone’s path to the workforce is different.”

-Workforce Leader

“Funding streams are often tied to a calendar when our lives aren’t tied to that same calendar. You could often help someone better if you weren’t tied to a calendar year.”

-Workforce Leader

“The system is lacking general, flexible support to intervene at the right time for a job seeker.”

-Workforce Leader

“People have different starting places, and training programs need to be really different for an immigrant with a high degree and someone who has a fourth-grade education level with a felony. The workforce development field needs to respond to all those things.”

-Workforce Leader
Underestimated job seekers are bursting with resilience, but they shouldn’t have to be.

Workforce leaders repeatedly praised resilience as a top strength of underestimated job seekers. Oftentimes that resilience is born out of experiences with poorly designed systems and services. For example, one discussion group participant said that underestimated job seekers are often good at customer service because they haven’t received good customer service before. “Sometimes what they haven’t been given makes them good at doing jobs.”

Several workforce leaders also commended the vulnerability job seekers must embrace in order to find work. To serve job seekers better, the workforce system often requires those people to share highly personal information about their life experiences and challenges. This vulnerability is what helps organizational intermediaries find employment opportunities and support services that best match job seekers’ needs. However, this attribute quickly becomes a deterrent when job seekers secure work, as people often need to start monitoring what they share in a professional environment to prevent jeopardizing their employment.
Workforce leaders pinpointed vulnerability and resilience as the most important strengths job seekers need in today’s workforce. Even so, these leaders also understand that job seekers have developed these two qualities out of harmful necessity and circumstance, rooted in experiences with unfair and unjust systems.
“The things [job seekers have] been through make them resilient.”

-Workforce Leader

“The strengths and qualities job seekers have of even putting themselves in a vulnerable position to say, ‘I don’t have this skill and I want to learn,’ is not easy for everyone to say. Just asking for help and going to a workforce center is admirable. People are putting themselves in a vulnerable position.”

-Workforce Leader

“I know a woman who was staying in shelter. She was very capable. She was determined and completed her training course successfully. She wanted to work in a medical office, and she found a position on her own. Her resilience in the need and want to get out of her current situation really drove her.”

-Workforce Leader

“The system has been built around a white culture. Just that [underestimated job seekers] have navigated that system to this point is a huge strength and I think it leads into what I mean about people putting themselves in a vulnerable position yet again by coming to a white-dominated center, facility, nonprofit or government agency, usually that’s got a predominantly white board and white staff. So navigating through that system for a lifetime is certainly a skill.”

-Workforce Leader
Underestimated job seekers experience a fractured, impersonal and dehumanizing workforce system that requires grit and determination to navigate. In this system, job seekers are often reduced to the boxes they do or don’t check. For example, one discussion group participant said that employers often push aside applicants who list their address as the Dorothy Day Center. When employers read that address, she said they simply see someone with unstable housing. They don’t see the potential of that person or the transferable work skills they have from experiencing homelessness. Workforce leaders cited transportation as another area where employers often misunderstand the real issues job seekers face, and how easy it can be to show up late for work if you’re relying on public transportation to get there. One participant explained how he’s heard about several job seekers who work in Bloomington and ride the bus for an hour and a half each way to “work at a job that can be demeaning and terrible, but they’re doing it because they want a better life.” The opportunity cost to the worker often goes unappreciated by CEOs and hiring managers. “When businesses think about their bottom line, then they say we can’t have someone who misses work four times, and they let that person go rather than understand why they were missing work and how to be supportive so they can have a good worker long-term.”
“Job seekers can have all the potential in the world, but if [employers] can’t recognize it and move that clay and mold it, then that potential goes unused. I’ve been doing a lot of hiring lately, and people often ask me, “What was it you saw in me?” A lot of times, it’s me I saw in them, and the potential that no one gave me an opportunity at that age. It’s on our end on the hiring seat to recognize potential that can be molded into something.”

-Workforce Leader

“You answer one question wrong, and you don’t know what it is, and you’re out. All you have to do is check a box and you’re gone.”

-Workforce Leader

“I think sometimes organizations do this to their detriment, and my organization does too, is they ratchet up the minimum requirements for compliance for different funding opportunities. There is no need to add on additional minimums or paperwork that just serve to disempower, regulate and survey participants and direct service providers. It would be significant to erase some of the barriers the system itself creates and reduce that barrier.”

-Workforce Leader

“The applicant tracking system is a huge barrier for everyone. Lift up the hood on the secret HR stuff. Teach them how to beat the system until we can fix the system.”

-Workforce Leader
Employers hold (almost all of) the power.

When it comes to leading improvement in the workforce system, employers hold most of the power to create meaningful change. They control who gets hired, who gets fired and what kind of culture they’ll tolerate within their company. Discussion group participants see job seekers as relatively powerless due to the power dynamics that exist between employers and employees. As one participant said: “I’d love to keep it honest with my potential employers, but then I wouldn’t have a job. The onus in listening to people usually has to come from those in power and those with the ability to listen.”
“The best avenue job seekers have to [lead improvements in the workforce system is to] influence the organizations that advocate for them. They can be real with the organizations they go to for help, and they can be clear about the experience they’re having and what those organizations can do better. That environment will be safer for people than going directly to the employer because [the employer] will just say “next”.

-Workforce Leader

“There are barriers in every step of the employment process. A huge gap is accountability in the employers and their willingness, or lack thereof, to do the work they need to welcome diverse talent.”

-Workforce Leader

“Many job seekers are more than qualified for positions they apply for, yet either they hear nothing or are rejected before they even can interview. I think the workforce should be more open to meeting with people and not just dismissing unpolished resumes. Many people have skills that can’t be easily written down, but are valuable to the workforce.”

-Workforce Leader
The system is stuck and workforce leaders know it, but they don’t know how to change it alone.

Workforce leaders, employers and decision makers are disconnected in three ways. They’re disconnected from the communities they serve, from the humanity of job seekers and from one another.

The strongest solutions are often designed by the people who experience the challenge directly. Yet the most important players in the workforce system, who have the power to make decisions, are disconnected from those people. On top of that, workforce leadership is disconnected from one another in a way that prevents organizations from sharing and building on one another’s best practices. This leads to an ineffective workforce system that must operate in a fundamentally different way if it hopes to succeed.
“Organizations are almost pitted against each other to compete for the same dollars, and in that same space, they’re not taught to work together to solve the problems of the communities they’re in. However, very few agencies offer the exact same thing, and they could work together and be more powerful in helping prepare people to work.”

-Workforce Leader

“During our group discussions, the idea of bringing the voice of job seekers into the center of the discussion was mentioned. In the world of employment service providers, the challenge has been to try and apply a values-based service approach to programs that are very outcome-based in the way that contract performance is measured. Individual service staff members are caught between the “new message” of re-thinking the way they work with clients versus pressure from managers (received on down the line) to hit outcome benchmarks that are often contradictory, or that interfere with the values-based approach that contract administrators purport to support.”

-Workforce Leader
Many educational institutions, both at the K-12 and college level, lack meaningful opportunities that engage students in the workforce system. Leaders in the workforce sector see an opportunity to connect with future job seekers early in their academic careers in order to create structured opportunities where youth can gain real-world work experience and learn the skills they’ll need to navigate the system in the future.

When we asked folks to tell us who were the most important job seekers to focus on, one discussion group participant answered third, fourth and fifth graders. “By the time you get to high school, you already know what you want to do and what you don’t want to do. You’re not moldable or shapeable, but at those younger years, the possibilities are endless.” Several workforce leaders view schools as a low-pressure environment where students can build critical skills that lead to workforce success—like resume writing and interviewing—before students are in a position where those skills make or break a possible career opportunity.
“[Latinx students] have the highest dropout rate at 40 percent. If we don’t focus on the younger people, we lose out on that whole population. Those young people are the workforce.”

-Workforce Leader

“High schools and middle schools need to get on board with internships and externships—opportunities where you can leave school to get job experience.”

-Workforce Leader

“Why don’t we have job assistance placement in the schools? Not something you stay after school to get, but a mandatory class that everyone needs to take.”

-Workforce Leader
JXTA’s Methods
Who We Talked to and Why

Juxtaposition Arts (JXTA) was contracted by Imagine Deliver to collaborate on the design and execution of a research method to collect feedback from underestimated job seekers. We worked collaboratively to generate interview questions and integrated a number of questions contributed by MSPWin’s Board of Directors. These prompts aimed to highlight aspects of being an underestimated job seeker such as resources used for seeking employment, skills that are often overlooked by employers and what it feels like to be truly supported in the workplace. JXTA Lead Artists and Youth Apprentices used two methods to collect data: one-on-one interviews with people they knew that fit the target group, and a shorter survey that contained many of the questions asked during interviews. Surveys were collected during three pop-up events, two of which were held in North Minneapolis and one of which was held in Frogtown, St. Paul. Overall, we spoke with 63 people (47 people during the pop-up events and 16 people in one-on-one interviews).
Race/Ethnicity of Participating Job Seekers

- African American (71.5%)
- Native American (11.5%)
- More than one race (7%)
- Asian American (4%)
- White (4%)
- Latinx or Hispanic (2%)

Age of Participating Job Seekers

- 18 - 29 yrs old (53%)
- 30 - 39 yrs old (19.5%)
- 40 - 49 yrs old (12.5%)
- 50 - 59 yrs old (9%)
- 60 - 69 yrs old (2%)
- 70 + yrs old (4%)

Are Participating Job Seekers Currently Looking For Work?

- Not looking for a job now (33%)
- Looking for a job now (67%)

Are Participating Job Seekers Currently Working?

- Employed (55.5%)
- Not Employed (42.5%)
- Occasionally Employed (2%)
Barriers Faced by Participating Job Seekers

Single Parent  Immigrant  Criminal Record  Less than HS diploma  Foster Care  Homelessness  Other

Prepared by Juxtaposition Arts
Top Insights We Learned From Job Seekers

Prepared by Juxtaposition Arts

1. Eliminating the box and humanizing the process.

2. Healthy workplaces are built on healthy relationships.

3. Independence and interdependence are both integral to finding fulfilling employment.
The First Insight

Eliminating the box and humanizing the process.

1 a

Time to build professional experience is a privilege.

1 b

Jobseekers who have been incarcerated are largely left out of the hiring processes, and employers often don’t practice empathy or understanding for the individuals.

1 c

Consistent access to safe and reliable transportation, childcare, and housing will increase capacity and stability as related to employment.

1 d

Valuing lived experience and offering pathways for training and progression on the job.
"The box" is not just a literal box in the job seeking process that can hinder access to employment, but also a figurative box that keeps people from being able to access opportunities, progress in their career or feel trusted by their employer. We heard about a need for flexibility in hiring processes, a need to value the expertise that comes with lived experience and a need to understand that underestimated job seekers often face very real challenges outside of work.
Time to build professional experience is a privilege.

When you’re experiencing homelessness, single parenting, past incarceration or other traumas/systems, you often don’t have time or space to build professional experience. You’re busy surviving while others are able to build their careers.

“A nonprofit is more likely to hire an established white man who has decades of experience... than they are to hire a black woman who doesn’t have a lengthy resume but can talk about her life experience in the interview or whatever, but what are the chances that you are going to get that interview if your resume doesn’t have decades of experience on it?”

-Job Seeker
Job seekers who have been incarcerated are largely left out of hiring processes, and employers often don’t practice empathy or understanding for the individuals.

Job seekers with criminal backgrounds are often turned away from many jobs, which leaves out large parts of the communities where those jobs are located. These discriminatory hiring practices take an emotional and financial toll on these job seekers. They feel defeated and hopeless about finding and securing a well-paying job.
“I just made a poor decision when I was young. Now that I’m older...having been through the process of seeing the hindrance that comes from having a criminal background, I understand how important it was to have never made that mistake in the first place. I feel like I’ve paid my debt just by getting denied for so many jobs.”

-Job Seeker

“I’m a felon, so sometimes I have to do [a] background check before I can actually go ahead and ask if they are hiring. People, when they look me up, they will be like, ‘Oh, you’re a felon,’ so therefore that automatically rule[s] me out instead of [the employer] actually clicking on that file to see what I’m a felon for.”

-Job Seeker
Transportation

Transportation affects the lives of job seekers on a day-to-day basis, yet many job seekers expressed that employers don’t understand how much of a barrier transportation can be. For job seekers who have no current source of income, transportation can be especially challenging if they do not have access to a ride. Public transportation is a living system—buses are late, traffic detours happen and fares increase. These factors, and more, often lengthen bus rides or make them inaccessible. Bus drivers are not always able to let job seekers ride the bus if they do not have the fare. Some job seekers may not feel safe taking public transportation due to unwanted attention or violence from other riders, but do not have consistent access to other rideshare options.

“When you are poor, you don’t have resources to get to jobs outside of [your neighborhood]. Obviously you can bus there, but in the winters here, that’s just gross. I’m not going to brave a polar vortex to get to work. So you have to stay in the area. It can be frustrating to find jobs in a small area versus like a mall or something where there are lots of jobs.”

-Job Seeker
Children

Some job seekers expressed that a lack of access to safe, reliable and affordable childcare has greatly limited their ability to find and maintain employment. Job seekers in this situation said they fear judgement and sense a lack of understanding from employers.

“I have a strong support system, so the fact that I am a single parent doesn’t matter when it pertains to me being employed. My sister, she’s had to put her kids in daycare for crazy hours. I watch them during the day, and then from 3 p.m. to 3 a.m., or 5 p.m. to 3 a.m. She’s a server, so her kids are falling asleep at daycare, and that’s where they sleep. Then she picks them up from the 24-hour daycare.”

-Job Seeker

“Being a single parent for sure [is an experience that can cause barriers]. If you talk about it, people don’t want to hire a mom because you have different kinds of obstacles. You can’t just sacrifice it all for the work.”

-Job Seeker
Housing

A number of job seekers expressed that homelessness and/or housing instability has affected or is currently affecting their ability to find and maintain meaningful employment. If one’s home space is unstable or nonexistent, it becomes much more difficult to manage other parts of one’s life, including employment.

“What Job Seekers Said:

“If your housing is not stable, how can you get up every morning and go to a job? It wouldn’t work. That’s a big barrier for some people who don’t have a place to stay. It’s like you can’t get a place to stay without a job, but it’s hard to get a job without a place to stay.”

-Job Seeker

“I would say experiencing homelessness and housing instability prevented me from getting my high school diploma, and I ended up getting my GED. If you don’t have the support as a youth, or if you are a homeless youth, getting an education is really difficult. Those things are kind of like...hustling, hustling, hustling.”

-Job Seeker

Insights from Job Seekers: Eliminating the box and humanizing the process.

Prepared by Juxtaposition Arts
Valuing lived experience and offering pathways for training and progression on the job.

Job descriptions and qualifications can be intimidating if you haven’t had the opportunity to build your professional experience. The cost and time required for college can be a barrier that compounds when trying to access job opportunities. A number of people we talked to expressed a desire for on-the-job training opportunities as well as employers who see lived experience as an asset that is valued on job applications.
“I feel like a lot of places will say [they require] a college degree, and not because you need it, but it’s kind of like a trust net...It’s about trust, like, I don’t know if they trust you enough...I feel like they should give more people a chance, [like a] program that supports people and understands that college is actually expensive...a small program within a company or an organization that has people who don’t have a college degree but who are trained into certain positions to work, whether that be like an assistant or whatever that may be, but not having to be in labor [roles].”

-Job Seeker

“Lowering requirements for certain jobs. I mean if training is provided, I feel like, if more hands-on training is provided and then they can go on with that. I feel like if it was to be like a hands-on training course, who can pass it, who can do it, I think that’d be a little bit more in step towards that direction.”

-Job Seeker
The Second Insight

Healthy workplaces are built on healthy relationships.

2a Positive and trusting relationships with managers are integral to the success and performance of an employee.

2b Employers must commit to creating a healthy and anti-racist culture at work.

2c Employers are often disconnected from the communities they hire from and/or are located in.
Healthy workplaces are built on healthy relationships.

Healthy relationships are at the core of a healthy workplace. The job seekers we spoke with identified trusting relationships between management and employees, anti-racist practices and culture in the workplace, and strong connections between employers and the neighborhoods they hire from/are located in as indicators of a desirable workplace.
Positive and trusting relationships with managers are integral to the success and performance of an employee.

The relationship between an employee and their manager is critical. People want to feel trusted, valued, appreciated and backed up by their employer. But a lack of trust, and even microaggressions and racism, are common in the workplace. Supervisors and employers who care about the well-being of their employees, and who look for the potential of their employees in and beyond the job they are currently doing, can make a huge difference in how a job seeker feels about their job and thinks about how they might progress in their career. Managers need training and support to build their skills and empathy.

“Some people can’t handle being in charge. When they get put in charge, they end up being mean to people and they don’t realize they’re being mean because they think they’re doing their job. And it’s like, no, you are actually hindering that growth process. Because now it’s going to come to the point where you felt like we got a problem and it’s like we don’t want the whole thing because you just don’t know how to talk to me.”

-Job Seeker
Employers must commit to creating a healthy and anti-racist culture at work.

Some job seekers we talked to spoke of a need for employers to fully commit to creating workplaces that don’t tolerate racism or bullying, that quell drama and that foster healthy communication. Employees don’t always feel safe to report problematic behavior of coworkers or supervisors, for fear of retribution. More training is needed for employers to create healthy workplaces, and organizations must build robust and supportive pathways for employees to safely communicate about workplace issues they encounter.

“So I believe just by creating those core values in a company like respect and a healthier work environment, and actually caring and valuing employees. Even if it’s just listening. You don’t have to do anything; just hear them out versus shut them down.”

-Job Seeker
Employers are often disconnected from the communities they hire from and/or are located in.

The job seekers we spoke with felt that employers often don’t take the time to build a relationship with the communities where their employees come from. This lack of relationship often results in distrust between employers, employees and job seekers. As a result of this distrust, job seekers feel that potential employers assign “characters” to them based on their appearance and background and often use discriminatory hiring practices without taking the time to understand who the job seeker really is.
“I’m a black man with locks and things like that. If I come in for an interview and my hair doesn’t look the best, it could instantly be taken the wrong way, as if I don’t care.”

-Job Seeker

“I would like to see management or the folks with the most power in the organization take various trainings and really be in tune with the communities that they serve and with how they won’t hire, instead of just throwing ‘diversity and inclusion’ in everything that they do. But actually garnering some kind of competence.”

-Job Seeker
The Third Insight

Prepared by Juxtaposition Arts

3

Independence and interdependence are both integral to finding fulfilling employment.

3a
Developing trust in yourself and your ability to identify what will work for you is key. (confidence, imposter syndrome, etc.)

3b
Identifying who you can lean on for resources, accountability and perspective will connect you beyond what you can do for yourself.
Independence and interdependence are both integral to finding fulfilling employment.

Job seekers often rely on their professional and personal networks to identify viable employment opportunities. A combination of internal needs assessment, self-motivation and external support can provide job seekers with information and resources to find employment.
Many of the job seekers we spoke with have developed trust in their “internal compass” to figure out what type of employment is right for them and what will serve their needs. This looks like being their own source of motivation, battling with imposter syndrome and identifying their personal needs and career desires. Some job seekers have also identified resources to build their craft on their own to support the development of their own businesses.

For some job seekers, their internal compass is the only support they have. These job seekers felt they couldn’t trust the folks around them because they didn’t have access to folks who could give them useful and valuable assistance. In these cases, the job seeker felt they had to be their own motivation.

“"You learn along the way on the internet. You read freelance books, you read freelance blogs, you watch YouTube videos. I’m far from a savvy entrepreneur, but I learn more and more every single day about how to operate. Now that I got my own crib, and now that I have my own expenses, I have an idea of how much I need to make, so that helps me charge, too. I’m also very confident in my work, in terms of authenticity. I’m confident in my skill, and I’m confident that it is something that is groundbreaking, and something that is different and new.”

-Job Seeker
“I trust myself, because I’m the only one who’s going to actually have to sacrifice. I’m the only one who’s going to give myself the motivation, the drive, the energy, the pep talk, all of that.”

-Job Seeker

“Imposter syndrome. Going from, ‘Ahhh, I have done stuff,’ to reading really unnecessarily wordy job descriptions and thinking, ‘What is this job? I can’t do this,’ even though you probably can.”

-Job Seeker

“I don’t think anybody can build my career. It’s something I have to do myself. So I trust the people who I work with and who I take career opportunities with. But as far as who I trust to build my career? Me.”

-Job Seeker

“I will have to say at this point, no one! Everybody has their own thoughts and perceptions about what they think is the best thing you should do. But no one is ever in your shoes. Nine out of 10 times when you ask somebody to step into your shoes, they are too self-involved.”

-Job Seeker
Identifying who you can lean on for resources, accountability and perspective will connect you beyond what you can do for yourself.

Not every job seeker we spoke to could identify other individuals who could help them build their career. Those who could mentioned individuals they knew who held a depth of professional experience, a passion for their field, a willingness to hold the job seeker accountable for their career aspirations and had the job seeker’s best interests at heart.

These individuals often connect job seekers to a larger system of resources and experiences they didn’t know about or believed they couldn’t access otherwise.
“I would say people that have had experience in [a] career type of job...like they love their position, it’s not like a job and it’s something that they take pride in. It’s just better advice. They’re more in-depth, they’re invested into their position both in the working environment and personally.”

-Job Seeker

“I trust my homies who are super accomplished to help me build my career. I trust former bosses I had who were decent and had my best interests in mind. And I trust my internal compass.”

-Job Seeker

“I choose people who are usually older than me or who I see are on the same page as me, not people who act like they’re on the same page as you or try to mirror your energy.”

-Job Seeker
“You meet people that tell you, ‘Oh, you probably should’ve charged a little more for that. Oh, you probably should write a contract so they don’t take advantage of you.’”

-Job Seeker

“I think true support looks like being challenged. Having people around you who hold you accountable for the things you want to do and accomplish. And having access people willing to share their professional resources with you.”

-Job Seeker
STRATEGIES TO TAKE ACTION
After listening to underestimated job seekers and those who serve them, we developed seven strategies for action that elevate underestimated job seekers and place them as the most central and valued users of the workforce system.

1. Eliminate the box altogether.
2. Carve space for growth.
3. Invest in healthy workplaces.
5. Value job seekers’ life experiences as solutions.
6. Instead of talking about promising practices, incentivize workforce leaders to implement them.
7. Learn from and elevate small, anti-racist models.
Minneapolis and St. Paul need workers. Over the next five years, there will be nearly a half million jobs to fill. Even still, the workforce system creates unnecessary barriers to employment based on identity factors like people’s race, appearance, housing status, level of education and experience with the justice system. These identities, or checked boxes, cannot on their own indicate the worth or competence of a job seeker, yet the system still disproportionately punishes certain identities. These boxes, both literal and figurative, must be removed.
“[One of our interviewees talked about] how his appearance sets him back, and how he’s educated, but how that’s not noticed. As soon as they see criminal background, they don’t consider him. He’s a tall black man with dreadlocks that has been to jail. He has the academics, but because he made one mistake back in his early teens, now he is labeled. A lot of white boys can get the label and discretion of youthfulness if they make a mistake, but with black men, we say ‘you’re a young man.’ We grow up quicker. We take on more responsibility quicker because everything [we] do is under a microscope.”

-JXTA Youth

“There’s a movement of people not calling their dreadlocks ‘dreads’ anymore, but I don’t call my dreadlocks ‘dreads’ because they’re not dreadful.”

-Job Seeker

“My mom has arrest records even though she has no convictions. In the field she is in, it’s unattractive to have records. She has diplomas in cosmetology and she has business experience, but that doesn’t shine through. [She] has this paper track that doesn’t fully showcase who she is, what she’s about and what she’s good at.”

-JXTA Youth
Explore how Amy Baxter’s work and nonprofit organization, We Are All Criminals, could inspire a public art installation or interactive marketing campaign to change public perception around employing people who have been formerly incarcerated.
Systems leaders need programming mechanisms and incentives that lead to collaboration, innovation and resource-sharing that don’t currently exist. Workforce leaders need opportunities where they can creatively collide and explore ways to implement and build on each others’ best ideas. The culture of competition and scarcity among workforce organizations must shift to one of collaboration and abundance in order for the sector to truly move toward innovation.
Strategies To Take Action: Carve space for growth.
Prepared by Imagine Deliver and Juxtaposition Arts

What Workforce Leaders and Job Seekers Said:

“Inject resources and capital into piloting initiatives with employers. Pilot specific kinds of tools with employers that have clear and tangible benefits, like advanced education or something related to finance, and then take the learning from there and let it spread.”

-Workforce Leader

“I think it would be cool to have a consortium of individuals across the entire employment life cycle, and to get to the point where you have job seekers, systems people and the transportation folks all talking together and not being afraid of each other. [Our organization] is new in the space, and so many times I hear, ‘We don’t want to get involved with you guys because eventually we’ll be competing for funding.’ I think it’s important to find the people who want to combine their abilities and capabilities as opposed to [continuing to segment] services.”

-Workforce Leader

“I want to get all the workforce people in one room. A thousand people in one room for a day-long conference [where we have] full staff there, not just one or two employees from each organization.”

-Workforce Leader
Ideas For Action

Bring the workforce system together; consider supporting an annual day-long workforce innovation “sprint.”
Today’s workplaces lack the humanity, empathy and compassion that real people need in order to thrive and excel in their careers. Job seekers want leaders and bosses who see them as people, not as autonomous robots or cogs in a machine. The workforce system must retrain leaders to operate from a place of empathy and understanding, and teach them how to build equitable systems that allow all people, regardless of their identities or life experiences, to feel welcome, safe and respected in the workplace.
“Empathy training seems to be so important because a lack of empathy seems to be where most of these problems stem from. Without empathy, you reduce people to numbers and facts, like they were late five times this week or they’ve had two years of experience. Then you come to the decision of whether they should stay, go or be hired without any kind of emotion involved in it.” - JXTA Youth

- JXTA Youth

“[Our boss] always makes sure we have transportation for meetings, that we feel prepared and that we have all the materials we need. She checks up on us. It makes me more excited to show up for work on time because they are not only doing the best for me, but they’re showing up for my community and providing jobs for people I grew up around. You see it coming back to you. [When you find a job] that makes you feel like you’re a part of your community and a team, then you’re more willing to show up, show out and represent for the job wherever you go.”

- JXTA Youth

“You don’t have to go to school to have empathy. It’s not a degree; it’s just an ear. It’s lending your voice. A lot of people don’t want to face what they’re uncomfortable with.”

- JXTA Youth
Build in extra layers of support for employees at their workplaces. This could look like encouraging employers to hire a liaison on staff—a person employees could turn to when they want to talk about how to navigate difficult situations that might put their job at risk if they shared them with an employer (see: Hennepin County, an employer that hired someone to fill this role and help people problem solve challenges like daycare and transportation).
The invisible hoops built into the workforce system—like applicant tracking systems that bump candidates out of the running for a job if their resume doesn’t match a certain number of keywords—only distracts employers, job seekers and the organizations that assist from recognizing job seekers’ greatest strengths and vast potential. These hidden traps must be exposed and eliminated.
“There was a very motivated job seeker who had applied to Hennepin County multiple times, and was screened out by the algorithm in the applicant tracking system. He enrolled in a career pathways job training program when he heard Hennepin County was the employer partner. It was a way to get in front of people instead of being eliminated through an automated algorithm, and he was hired right away after graduating. The employer heard that there was someone who was really motivated who was going to be an outstanding employee, but who had been trying literally for years to work for Hennepin County. It took that interpersonal job shadowing and employer-involved curriculum design to actually make that happen.”

-Workforce Leader

“Hennepin County is looking at their job applications to see where they’ve had credential creep, and they’ve been asking themselves: ‘Do I really need to screen people out for this thing?’ It elevated the notion that they need to look at their job descriptions and rethink what they put in the applicant tracker, and remember that they’re dealing with people.”

-Workforce Leader

“There are black holes in the system. How do we take the complexity out? How do we prevent people from getting knocked out from the application tracking system or the application system for insignificant reasons?”

-Workforce Leader
Teach job seekers how to beat applicant tracking systems. Invest in strategies to redesign technology that holds job seekers back.
Value job seekers’ life experiences as solutions.

We need to retrain the workforce system to trust job seekers structurally. The best systems, services and products are designed by the people who use them. Workforce leaders must find ways to integrate job seekers’ voices into the design of the workforce system in a way that carries real influence and decision-making power to dismantle, rework and rebuild outdated structures and practices.

Part of changing the system is also about changing the narrative and how people see underestimated job seekers. Workforce leaders need to explore who is telling the story of underestimated job seekers, and how that story is being told. Joblessness is not the job seeker's problem. It’s a symptom of a racist history, and our narrative should reflect that.
“There is an opportunity there. You see youth councils getting involved with city councils and policy. How do we help work with employers to bring in the voices [of job seekers]?”

-Workforce Leader

“We’ve got people we pay who tell us how many jobs we need to have filled, but we need voices from the people who are going to fill those jobs, and that voice is just as important.”

-Workforce Leader

“Trust is the currency of relationships. You need to meet the job seekers where they’re at. You need to understand their barriers, perception and take time to build a relationship with them. You can’t build a better workforce system without trust.”

-Workforce Leader

“How do we share the success stories of the people we serve so we build champions in the community and so people understand the resilience of the people we serve? Heart disease is the number one killer of women, yet more people think breast cancer is the biggest issue. The difference is breast cancer has a great marketing campaign. Energy breeds energy. What kind of marketing campaign could we have that would elevate the voices of the community and share the stories of the beauty and the strengths of the people we serve?”

-Workforce Leader

Strategies To Take Action: Value job seekers’ life experiences as solutions.
Prepared by Imagine Deliver and Juxtaposition Arts
Idea
For
Action

1) All systems change efforts require a collective campaign (see: MN Girls are Not for Sale). Consider a marketing campaign that highlights the assets of underestimated job seekers.

2) Sometimes a system can’t change fast enough. Invest in wealth building and entrepreneurship so underestimated job seekers can change the system by building their own.
Instead of talking about promising practices, incentivize workforce leaders to implement them.

Workforce leaders are aware of best practices and promising research—like person-centered services and flexible funding—that can create a stronger workforce system. Yet these strategies aren’t shared or implemented system-wide. It’s time for practitioners to put what they know into practice and start solving problems through trial and error rather than conversation.
“We’re looking at how to fully integrate the services of our agency, which sounds easy, but it isn’t because it’s hard when you’re siloed and you have all the different contracts that you’re working with. We’re just starting to hear research about how much more successful things are when you integrate services, though. What that looks like for people is the services should feel more seamless, and then that builds more trust with the people you serve.”

-Workforce Leader

“I think there is an opportunity to lift up organizations like the City of Minneapolis and Hennepin County that only do trainings when there is an employment opportunity tied to it. If you’re doing a training and you don’t have employers on the backside that are going to hire, what are you doing the training for? That creates a whole gap of people who are underserved. It would be nice to have the City of Minneapolis and Hennepin County actually teach how they do it so others can learn.”

-Workforce Leader
Ideas For Action

1) Survey the workforce system, asking them to share promising organizational practices that could lead to statewide systems change. Hire workforce leaders to train their peers in the innovative methods and strategies that are working within their individual organizations.

2) Start a new funding stream that grants money and resources to organizations willing to pilot new models and promising practices. Then use what grantees learn to develop best practices and learning that can be shared sector-wide (see: The Impact Foundation in Fargo).
Learn from and elevate small, anti-racist models.

Minnesota’s workforce system was built around a white culture. Leaders must explore how to re-create the system from the ground up in a way that bakes equitable, anti-racist practices into the skeleton of the system, rather than trying to fix the flawed outcomes a broken system produces.
“Solving barriers needs a focus and spotlight on those in positions of power and money to change themselves, not on the people experiencing barriers. We need to shift the lens away from IBPOC and shift the microscope to those who continue to embody racism, greed, extreme capitalism and patriarchy.”

-Workforce Leader

“What Workforce Leaders and Job Seekers Said:

“The power dynamics are so different in the workforce system at large, so I would want all of the players to have more equal space at the table, including underestimated job seekers and community-based organizations. To come up with longer-term solutions, there needs to be more equal footing at the decision making tables.”

-Workforce Leader"
Idea
For
Action

Develop a statewide “council of workers” to inform business decision makers.
This engagement effort was made possible by the stewardship and commitment of MSPWin’s board and leadership, led by Ellen Waters of Ellen Waters Consulting.

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Imagine Deliver is a consulting firm that helps clients take action on new ways of working that benefit everyone. We use universal and human-centered design to encourage people to tap into their creativity and uncover inventive solutions fueled by their communities.

As a certified B Corp, our team cares about taking concrete action on the change we want to see in the world. In our work, we help clients dream up and act on better and more equitable ways of working. But we can only do that if we’re committed to leading by example and transforming ourselves in the very same way. That’s why we care about building a better kind of consulting firm that commits to the community, supports a diverse team and takes care of the environment. We believe that success in business is only possible if we demonstrate an active commitment to our community. Together we can build stronger systems, but it takes care and creativity to get there. Being a B Corp is one way we choose to show up for our community. That means any investment in Imagine Deliver’s work doesn’t just stop with our company, but extends to our people, our neighborhoods and the planet.