

COMMUNICATING WITH VULNERABLE WORKERS ABOUT RESOURCES, TRAINING, AND IMPROVING JOB PROSPECTS



WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief—developed by Communication**Works**, LLC for the Data for the American Dream project—synthesizes existing research about how to communicate effectively with low-income, lower-skilled, unemployed, and underemployed workers. It reviews challenges and strategies about communicating with these workers and suggests the implications for workforce agencies in connecting with these workers.

The document draws on academic research, implementation, and evaluation studies of previous communications efforts to reach similar audiences; focus group outcomes; and interviews with leading experts in the field.

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ABOUT DATA FOR THE AMERICAN DREAM

Data for the American Dream (D4AD) is a consortium bringing together Schmidt Futures, Lumina Foundation, Walmart Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation. D4AD currently funds pilot initiatives in three states (Colorado, Michigan, and New Jersey) that will help provide low-income, lower-skilled, underemployed, and unemployed workers access to current and actionable data, enlisting local case managers from public and private agencies to counsel jobseekers, help them access needed services, and reach the most underserved populations. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) is the implementation partner of D4AD. NCHEMS is a private nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve strategic decision making in postsecondary education for states, systems, institutions, and workforce development organizations in the United States and abroad.



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INTRODUCTION

Only months ago, the conversation about the U.S. economy was focused on historically low unemployment rates, the fact that the country had more open positions than workers seeking employment, and worries about the growing skills gap. That conversation ignored the fact that nearly half of the U.S. workforce was employed in low-wage positions, that as many Americans were underemployed as unemployed, and that a large portion of working adults lacked any financial cushion and were living paycheck to paycheck, often stuck in jobs that neither built skills nor led to career advancement and a living wage.

Even with unemployment at historic lows and open positions outnumbering the number of jobseekers in the country, workers still had a hard time finding useful, actionable, and just-in-time information to improve their job prospects. The most vulnerable workers lacked accessible, useful, and actionable information about employment, education and training, and about how to best match their skills, knowledge, and aspirations with good jobs. Today, wracked by economic recession in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, these needs are even greater than before.

With the help of new technologies, new initiatives are creating digital career-exploration tools that can identify existing jobs; match workers' skills with new openings; identify additional education, skills, and training workers need to advance their careers; and make sense of the avalanche of information about career development. These initiatives are also buttressing new tools and resources with additional work and income supports and real-time advising. This blend of tools and services enables students and jobseekers to explore career pathways that lead not just to the next job but to work opportunities that help them develop skills, earn more, and advance in careers.

How can public and private agencies communicate with—and motivate—jobseekers to put data and information to use in their efforts to improve job prospects?

A review of research shows that tools, resources, and information will only be effective for those intended to benefit from them if they are readily available, visible, and valued. Effective communications require paying close attention to how individuals receive and process information, perceive their employability, and what technologies they have access to and use. This outreach also requires effective communication with other key players, including caseworkers, local community organizations, and employers.

The following brief to assist D4AD partners and allied organizations looks at several key communication and outreach strategies that are based on research about past efforts to successfully reach low-income, lower-skilled, unemployed, and underemployed workers.

COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH STRATEGIES

These strategies are intended to help public and private agencies work smarter when reaching out to low-income, lower-skilled, and unemployed workers for the purposes of engaging them in services, education, training, and job seeking. The strategies are also designed to help workforce development systems and their partners address complex contextual challenges that prevent low-income, lower-skilled, unemployed, and underemployed workers from gaining access to these tools.

Segmenting and Targeting Audiences

A quick scan of the labor force reveals that the most vulnerable workers share certain commonalities based on their job status, but also are significantly diverse demographically, geographically, and culturally. They also have diverse workforce development and social service needs and are affected differently by the education system and changing labor markets.

For example, while Black and Hispanic workers have higher or similar labor force participation rates to White workers, they have higher un- and underemployment rates and earn significantly less.¹ Low-wage workers are disproportionately female, with women representing 54 percent of low-wage workers, higher than their total share of the workforce (48 percent).² Rural areas have lower labor participation rates than metro areas. This is due, in part, to a larger percentage of the population that is aging, but the lower rates hold true for their prime working years as well.³ And more than one-quarter of the country's involuntary part-time employees were working in one of nine western states with Nevada, California, and Arizona having the highest rates of such workers in the country in 2014.⁴

The vast diversity of workers and their needs was underscored in the recent Brookings Institution report, *Meet the Low-Wage Workforce* (Nov. 2019), which noted that the many attributes of workers—including age, educational attainment, school enrollment status, race, ethnicity, gender, family composition, and geography—influence how they engage with the labor market.

Outreach efforts need to take this diversity into account in order to connect with workers and to influence and motivate them to use new data tools and information resources. This means that states and agencies developing messages, materials, and outreach strategies need to be sensitive to cultural expectations, prioritize and target specific audiences, and customize outreach tools with particular audiences in mind. They also need to work with influencers and dissemination partners who have access to different communities and regions.

KEY STRATEGIES

- Formally (through review of research, focus groups, and interviews) and informally (through tapping into the expert experience of your staff) answer questions that can help shape strategy, messages, and tactical approaches to inform and influence key audiences. These include:
 - What specific challenges does the diversity of an audience pose in communicating about new tools and resources in your state?
 - How can you best segment audiences by race/ethnicity, geography, and need?
 - Which audiences share similar characteristics that allow you to communicate across boundaries to different groups?
 - Which audiences need special messaging?
 - What strategies best work for specific audiences?
 - Which partners have the most access to the types of workers you are trying to reach?
 - What communication vehicles will have the most impact on each audience?
 - What considerations about language should you make (reading level, translations, etc.)?
- Identify desired actions or changes in behaviors that you hope to see for each audience.
- Pay close attention to what motivates different audiences to take action.
- Prioritize audiences and focus first on the populations you believe have the most urgent needs and should receive the greatest attention.
- Continuously assess what messages and outreach efforts are working effectively with different audiences and modify future communications based on feedback.

Identifying target audiences and the desired actions for those audiences to take allows a state's or program's outreach efforts to hone in on particular strategies that will be most successful for those audiences.

Engaging Users in Design and Outreach

To strengthen tool development, build trust and buy-in with key audiences, and promote resources effectively, workforce development agencies and programs should engage diverse workers in each phase of the work. Workers can advise product designers on everything from design and usability, implementation and continuous refinement, to marketing and outreach.

For more on how to utilize market research and continuous improvement processes to adjust and revise data and information tools, check out:

Making Data Work for Low-Income, Lower-Skilled, Unemployed, and Underemployed Individuals

Specifically, the worker perspective can help address key design and usability issues:

- What specific information do these workers need?
- How can we best organize information to serve them?
- What constraints do workers face in using the tools?
- How do they prefer to access information and in what formats?
- Who do they listen to and trust, and how can this potentially be factored into product design and outreach through use of video, testimonials, or strategies that maximize peer-to-peer communication?

This is more than a product-development, user-experience research strategy. It is also a valuable communication strategy. Engaging your target audiences early and often in the process will help initiatives communicate more effectively. It helps identify what types of communications workers are most responsive to, including settings, vehicles, messages, and messengers. It helps identify what motivates your different audiences to take action. It helps to identify what stereotypes and biases need to be avoided, and to assess assumptions about how best to reach workers and the messages to which they respond.

KEY STRATEGIES

- Identify a core group of case workers and community organizers with high levels of interaction with target audiences and who understand how state and local agencies operate, to test and provide feedback on tools, communications strategies, and outreach materials and strategies.
- Create an advisory group of workers who are representative of your target audiences of low-income, lower-skilled, unemployed, and underemployed, and who reflect the particular demographics of your community, to advise on all communication strategy and outreach efforts.
- Ensure there is a continuous feedback loop from these groups as tools, resources, and communication plans and materials are developed and refined.

Overall, this process helps agencies and organizations develop familiarity and credibility with the audience they will ultimately want to reach. This not only provides useful feedback to develop effective messages, message vehicles, and outreach, but also ensures that communications and marketing are not an afterthought but are central to the initiative from the start.

Use of Intermediaries to Reach Targeted Audiences and Engender Trust

Most services are designed on the assumption that customers will seek the service out—either voluntarily because they are seeking a job or further education and training, or because they are required to as part of a social service program. A worker who enters a one-stop job center or voluntarily engages with an online tool is already in the system. While ensuring those workers stay engaged is a challenge, reaching the many workers who are outside the system is an even larger challenge.

Many of these workers are the hardest hit by the recession and are difficult to reach because they may not use technology regularly or have a stable place of residence, and they may be distrustful of social services.

It can be an expensive proposition to create outreach campaigns to get the word out directly to these workers. Communications initiatives aiming to broaden their reach—and build their credibility with more workers—have addressed this challenge by partnering with organizations that have regular contact with the people who need the most help. For example, leaders of participating sites in the implementation of the Work Advancement and Support Center (WASC) demonstration—a program designed to increase the incomes of low-wage workers by offering intensive employment retention and advancement services and easier access to work supports all offered in one location—immediately recognized the need to find alternative ways of reaching out to vulnerable workers. A 2006 MDRC study notes that the leaders quickly realized that they would “find it even more difficult to recruit participants from low-wage working families who have had no previous exposure to either workforce or human service agencies [and] that to publicize WASC, they must reach out to employers, community-based organizations, and other community groups that have regular contact with workers.”¹⁵ Members of these intermediary organizations were “able to engage residents in ways that are more familiar to them than the style of outreach that comes directly from a government agency.”¹⁶

Researchers who have conducted these studies point out the importance of ensuring that intermediary organizations understand who a workforce development program can serve and how. For instance, engaging a community-based organization in making referrals to a workforce agency only to have many of these referrals not be eligible or prepared for services could alienate workers who may feel misled, which could further lead to frustration and mistrust between the community-based organization and the workforce development agency.

Research on intermediaries demonstrates the value of the trust that these organizations engender among workers to overcome potential negative perceptions and distrust workers may have about government services. For instance, in research on outreach strategies to promote the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), researchers found that "community-based organizations" (CBOs) also were attractive grassroots partners for targeting and enrolling diverse populations because they have the expertise with, access to, and trust of community members. This is particularly important for certain populations, namely immigrant families, families with language or cultural differences, families with negative past experience with government agencies, low-wage workers in small businesses, and families in rural areas."⁷

Most important, trusted messengers can help workers see themselves in a system that they may find confusing, not applicable to their situation, or simply of little value. Messengers who are actual workers who took advantage of services—both job placement and training services as well as work and income support services while they pursued a new position—and succeeded, can be the most persuasive ambassadors for a program.

KEY STRATEGIES

- Engage a wide range of partners for outreach, including community-based organizations, faith-based groups, and other nonprofit groups. Seek to develop communications that are mutually beneficial to these organizations and the outreach efforts for workforce development and training tools and resources.
- Ensure that the expectations of how those individuals referred by partner organizations will be served are clear.
- Produce materials—informational, marketing, and advertising—that can be easily placed in locations of other organizations as well as in their own communications vehicles, including social media. Again, consider how this can be done reciprocally whereby information about the services these groups provide workers are available when workers engage with the workforce development process.
- Identify a cadre of ambassadors who can tell their own personal success stories. Ambassadors should be diverse and match up with the audiences you want to reach. Video testimonials are particularly accessible and persuasive.
- Where stories of actual workers are not possible, a secondary strategy would be to construct personas of the workers so that outreach materials still reflect the various audiences being targeted.
- Include partners in media outreach strategies to provide stories about a state agency working with a community organization to address a particular group of workers' needs.

Multiple communication and outreach strategies should be considered to engage intermediary organizations and trusted messengers.

Managing Information

Workers who are seeking a new job or career advancement face a dizzying array of information. Sorting through that information and determining which is reliable can be a daunting task, particularly for those unfamiliar with how various workforce development, job training, and support services work. For many of these workers, too much information can be as much a barrier as too little information, particularly if the information does not appear applicable to their needs. Finding the time to wade through and evaluate all this information can also be a factor, particularly for those already working significant hours and with other family responsibilities such as caring for a child or other dependent.



The federal government, which funds the majority of state-level workforce development programs, conducted research in 2016 to address a complex challenge—how to “improve the public’s interactions with the government across the board.” Their findings indicate that people “feel ill-equipped to make choices about government services when the government presents too many options or inadequate information about those options.”⁸

To keep from overwhelming the user, information needs to be narrowly focused as well as relevant, timely, sequenced, and easily acted upon.

The goal should be to get workers to engage in a series of manageable job-search tasks—to stay connected over the long-term—rather than trying to get all of the information or engagement in one encounter. Even the most basic task, such as filling out an application, can be frustrating online if the process is too long or overly complex. A 2016 report from the Society of Human Resource Management cites data from CareerBuilder indicating that “60 percent of jobseekers quit in the middle of filling out online job applications because of their length or complexity [and] other industry sources say that abandonment rate may be conservative.”⁹

Relevance also matters. Workers with multiple responsibilities and limited time are not going to engage with communications that simply appear to be yet another generic, mass-marketing effort. Successful outreach campaigns have clear asks that will result in clear results that make the engagement worth the worker’s effort. This means that messages need to clarify the value proposition for the jobseeker—how whatever is being asked of the worker directly relates to getting a job and how it puts the worker in position to advance in the field. It is about the job, the trajectory, and not just the class, the training, or the service.

Pairing short-term and long-term-oriented outreach and tasks also helps workers to see a pathway and feel that they are making progress. For example, workers who are required to complete certain paperwork to apply for income or work supports may be more open to taking on an additional task such as completing a skills assessment survey at the same time, but would not be willing to make a separate appointment. In this case, it is helpful to pair two tasks, linking one activity of immediate importance with a secondary task that can serve as a foundation for future engagements, to avoid placing any extra burden on the worker’s time or need for transportation.

KEY STRATEGIES

- Develop a sequence of job-seeking and skill-development tasks that build from simple to more complex, to keep jobseekers engaged. Don’t start engagement without knowing what the next communication steps will be.
- Ensure that each communication includes something that the jobseeker needs or values, not just information that the agency needs.
- Match what information is sent with the medium, using the most easily accessed method as much as possible.

Access to Technology

While virtually all high-wage workers use digital tools to get information, communicate with colleagues, and advance in their work, low-income workers often don't have access to the Internet or mobile devices, and often are not as adept at using technology or navigating workforce and government service sites, which can be complex and require extensive information from the user.

National data bear this out. According to some of the most recent data from the Pew Research Center, "Roughly three-in-ten adults with household incomes below \$30,000 a year (29 percent) don't own a smartphone. More than four-in-ten don't have home broadband services (44 percent) or a traditional computer (46 percent). And a majority of lower-income Americans are not tablet owners. By comparison, each of these technologies is nearly ubiquitous among adults in households earning \$100,000 or more a year."¹⁰ Low-income workers are more likely to be mobile-phone dependent and as a result "are more likely to use them for tasks traditionally reserved for larger screens. For example, lower-income smartphone owners were especially likely to use their mobile device when seeking out and applying for jobs."¹¹ In addition, "racial minorities, older adults, rural residents, and those with lower levels of education and income are less likely to have broadband service at home."¹²

Access to technology is an initial barrier that can often be exacerbated by digital literacy challenges, as "low- and middle-skilled workers more frequently lack proficiency in using computers and the Internet, making it difficult to navigate labor market matching technology."¹³



Low-income adults are increasingly using social media with 68 percent of adults with an income under \$30,000 using at least one social media site. However, it is important to keep in mind that of the most popular social media platforms only Facebook and YouTube are consistently used by over 50 percent of American adults and Facebook's "user base is most broadly representative of the population as a whole."¹⁴

Technology-based communication and outreach strategies, particularly those aimed at getting workers to use a digital tool, need to be direct and strategic.

KEY STRATEGIES

- Develop outreach tools that are specifically targeted to mobile phone users rather than only computer-based tools that are simply adapted to mobile technology.
- Ensure that online tasks, particularly those that are to be completed on mobile devices, are simple and clear using mobile devices. Use simple, concise language at an appropriate reading level (8th grade) and in multiple languages if necessary.
- Use text messages to convey big-picture messaging, such as encouraging workers to explore longer-term career options and pathways to get there and check their own hesitation to receive training as well as to regularly to get workers to take specific action (e.g, come to a meeting, check in with case managers, file for unemployment). Text messages can also alert people to check their email or go to a website for more detailed information. Do not assume that sending an email alone will be successful in reaching the target.
- Survey social media use of individuals served and develop social media outreach plans that target the most commonly used platforms.

Making and maintaining a connection with low-income workers requires a personal touch as well as a deft use of technology. Just as "data and information are more effective when paired with resources that can help the population of interest navigate the process for engaging with education and/or training opportunities or job search assistance,"¹⁵ communication efforts are also dependent on people. It matters who delivers messages online to the target audience and that there is plenty of in-person support in conjunction with, or as a follow-up to, online engagement.

Addressing Stigma

Vulnerable workers often must overcome stigma about receiving public benefits and participating in programs designed to help them succeed in the workforce. Workers often perceive government assistance with employment as “government welfare programs,” making some workers less likely to seek help and more likely to distrust service providers. Equally significant, workers also often perceive employment service agencies as being focused solely on unemployed workers rather than serving those in need of assistance with job retention and career advancement.

For example, one workforce advancement initiative found that the “program’s services— particularly work supports— may suffer from the stigma often attached to publicly funded programs, particularly welfare programs. Another potential problem . . . is that people who are aware of the One-Stop tend to see it as a place where the unemployed can be helped to find jobs, but not as a source of help for people who are already working.”¹⁶

While workers may feel stigma about receiving social service benefits, they also feel anxiety about losing that assistance if they take a low-income position and reach what is commonly referred to as the “benefits cliff.” The “cliff” refers to the “the sudden and often unexpected decrease in public benefits that can occur with a small increase in earnings. When income increases, families sometimes lose some or all economic supports. . . . Often, wage increases result in a net loss of income or only a small overall increase [and] can create an anchor into, rather than a ladder out of, poverty.”¹⁷ The cliff, whether real or perceived in an individual’s situation, can serve as a disincentive to pursue additional work that will only lead to slightly improved income without improving individual or family financial well-being. On the other hand, some workers may feel that they are being stereotyped as overly dependent on the public safety net.¹⁸

At the same time, case managers and other service providers may carry a bias about providing work support and other social services to workers, believing that these services will make a candidate less likely to pursue full employment. They see “the goal of public programs as ultimately helping participants achieve economic self-sufficiency and independence from all forms of public assistance, including work supports”¹⁹ and therefore may see work supports as a barrier to self-sufficiency rather than as a stepping stone.

Outreach and communications should focus on how services help workers develop personally and professionally rather than on providing government supports. Services are an economic and social investment, a stepping stone toward financial and family independence rather than a pathway to government dependence.

KEY STRATEGIES

- Focus messages about counseling and skills development not only on developing immediate opportunities but also on how those services are one step of a longer pathway to careers.
- Link short-term actions with long-term solutions. Messages that only address immediate next steps won’t connect with a desire to make progress toward achieving long-term aspirations and can perpetuate a sense that the next step may be leading nowhere. Meanwhile, focusing on long-term possibilities can appear tone deaf to workers’ immediate needs.
- Consider two-generation messages that demonstrate these services are focused not only on helping the worker address immediate needs, but are also about strengthening the position of their families for the future.

Creating Positive and Forward-Looking Messages

Too often, language used in policy and the media focuses on “the skills gap,” which perpetuates the perception that workers have serious deficits and lack knowledge, skills, and motivation. In many cases, the skills gap is a result of shifts in the economy unrelated to the capabilities and talents of individual workers and the workforce as a whole. The deficit language often implies that there is something wrong with workers and that they cannot develop needed skills through career pathways. It feeds negative attitudes and biases about the capabilities and motivation of lower-skilled workers. These perceptions can add to what some refer to as a “belief gap”—negative attitudes low-income workers may have about themselves. Vulnerable workers often cannot see themselves in certain positions or as pursuing certain career opportunities due to “deeply ingrained mindsets resulting from intergenerational poverty and limiting beliefs that are perpetuated in communities that have experienced generations of limited opportunities [and] the lack of role models, mentors, or supportive figures instilling a sense of confidence in oneself and one’s ability.”²⁰

KEY STRATEGIES

- Create outreach materials and targeted campaigns that can help workers see themselves as being successful in advancing to long-term stable jobs and professions through motivating language or by using ambassadors or personas.
- Provide materials that offer pragmatic advice and supports that balance what is desirable with what is feasible and available. The goal is to be aspiring in the long-term, but also to present a clear and practical pathway so that loftier, long-term goals do not become the source of failure.
- Ensure that front-line communicators are aware of potential self-perception and mental health issues that could be not only creating a barrier to finding a job, but also to successfully communicate about how they are feeling or what they need.

In addition, un- and underemployed workers (particularly those who have been out of work for some time) are more likely than their peers to feel a sense of personal failure and frustration and report that they are dealing with mental health issues.

For example, low-income and unemployed workers often experience extensive frustration, negative surprises, and feelings of being trapped in a “cycle” of temporary jobs that lead only to new job searches.²¹ For unemployed workers, this can lead to a loss of hope and depression. The Gallup Organization found that “unemployed Americans are more than twice as likely as those with full-time jobs to say they currently have or are being treated for depression—12.4 percent vs. 5.6 percent, respectively.” Gallup also found that the depression rate among the long-term unemployed (those who have been seeking work for 27 weeks or more) was significantly higher (18 percent).²² Similarly, “studies of the physical and mental health of underemployed workers reveal greater susceptibility to stress, depression, substance abuse, and chronic disease.”²³

Outreach and communications efforts to all constituencies—workers, employers, and partner organizations—should focus on worker assets and strive to counter messages focused on deficiencies and limitations.

Engaging Employers

Framing unemployment issues as a worker problem ignores the fact that employer bias and recruitment and hiring policies and practices contribute to the challenge of helping more workers find jobs and advance in their careers.



To avoid hiring unemployed workers, employers often prefer—or even require—job candidates to be currently employed as a qualification for hiring. According to Workplace Fairness, a nonprofit organization working to preserve and promote employee rights:

“A stigma persists that unemployed and laid-off workers are to blame for their situation, perhaps due to poor work ethic or bad personalities. Because of this, studies show that some employers have begun discriminating against unemployed and laid-off workers when they apply for work. Other research indicates that applicants who had been unemployed for just one month were seen as less hireable to HR professionals. This bias worsens the longer an individual is out of work.”²⁴

Research conducted to examine these biases found “that unemployment stigma exists, occurs instantaneously, is difficult to alleviate, and leads to hiring biases against the unemployed.”²⁵ And in another study “economist Rand Ghayad found that companies even favored job applicants without relevant experience over those who used to work in the same industry but have been unemployed for a long stretch.”²⁶

In addition, while credentials are perceived as the pathway to the middle-class, requiring them can also end up being an unintended barrier, particularly if they are not a real requirement or are used simply as a sorting mechanism. Automated applicant screening software, used by an increasing

number of employers, often eliminates potential employees who are qualified for open positions. This adds “rigidity to the process that screens out all but the theoretically perfect candidate.”²⁷ This is compounded by employers “up-credentialing” job qualifications, leading to workers appearing unqualified for even middle-skill jobs as well as a rise in recent graduates with bachelor’s degrees being underemployed as they take positions that do not require a four-year degree. Researchers at Harvard Business School, Accenture, and Grads of Life “discovered that rising demand for a four-year degree for jobs that previously did not require one not only harms U.S. businesses, but also closes off critical career pathways for millions of middle-skilled Americans.”²⁸

While several different strategies have emerged to bridge gaps between employer expectations and needs and the skills and knowledge workers bring to the table—including sector-specific training, creating more articulate definitions of particular skills, and strengthening apprenticeships and other on-the-job training programs—there are also several considerations from a communications standpoint.²⁹

KEY STRATEGIES

- Consider targeting employers as well as workers and jobseekers in outreach campaigns. This goes beyond working with employers to identify needs or coordinating education, training, and placements. Just as employees need help to get over their own self-perceptions, employers often need help getting over their own biases and perceptions about workers.
- Have high-level staff meet with employers early on to signal the level of commitment the workforce agency has to the employer and sector.
- Maintain regular communications with employers and seek opportunities to have employers serve in some capacity for the workforce agency, such as on advisory boards.
- Address employer perception that caseworkers are simply trying to place a worker in any position to reduce their caseload. Stress that workforce development has evolved and is focused on career pathways.
- Messaging should focus on corporate responsibility over the long term. Just as states and communities work to help un- and under-employed workers think about work and career pathways in the long-term, employers have a responsibility to think about hiring and training in the long term.

Conclusion

The available research on communicating with vulnerable populations about employment and career pathway opportunities is not robust as compared to efforts to address other concerns they may face, such as gaining access to health care or social services.



The research that exists, however, provides useful guidance for designing and implementing communications to reach vulnerable workers. The basic elements reflect core principles of strategic communications,³⁰ which require:

- Defining and analyzing the target audience.
- Identifying goals and objectives.
- Creating strategies that mitigate barriers and advance key goals.
- Going where the audience is and using the right platform.
- Developing intentional messaging delivered, where possible, by the most trusted messengers.
- Aligning tactics with goals and evaluating them based on key factors, such as likely impact and the organization's capacity and resources.
- Staging activities in phases that take advantage of opportunities in a specific timeframe.
- Measuring progress and results.

Communicating effectively with vulnerable workers about resources and training to help them improve their employment prospects also requires particular considerations and strategies to meet the unique circumstances of these workers. Chief among these:

- The population of vulnerable workers is composed of diverse audiences, and communications vehicles and messages must be developed to reach each audience.
- Communication strategies should engage users in research, design, and messaging to target communications successfully for their audience(s).
- Trusted intermediaries and ambassadors should be enlisted as partners to reach audiences of vulnerable workers.
- Employers should be included in outreach efforts to maintain ongoing communications about employer needs and worker skills and training.
- Information and tools about jobs and employment and training opportunities should be concise and relevant to the needs, information interests, and personal constraints of workers.
- Technologies employed in communications should be appropriate to the access to, and experience with, technologies of low-income workers.
- Messages for workers should be positive and forward looking, to help mitigate low-income and unemployed workers' negative attitudes about their circumstances and the stigma of participating in government programs.

Now, more than ever, workforce development efforts need to share what they are learning about their communications and programs. As public and private agencies respond, we recommend government and philanthropy invest not only in their responses, but also in learning more about what works best to connect with the most vulnerable workers.

ENDNOTES

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