



CAREER READINESS FRAMEWORK

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THE RACISM INHERENT IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT JARGON

Language matters. If the racial equity movement has taught us anything, it is this. And the workforce development field is no exception. As with many professional fields, we suffer from an abundance of jargon. From the professional titles we use--job developer, career development specialist, individual placement manager--to the funding acronyms we can't escape--WIOA, TANF, CDBG--the field is mired in shorthand.

But what happens when that insider language is an agent of oppression?

For a field that predominantly serves black and brown individuals, we can no longer be content with the language, nor ideology, that underpins our work. Take, for example, the long-held maxim that job seekers simply need to gain the necessary "soft skills" in order to be "job ready." This presumes that job seekers are deficient vessels that need merely to be filled with a set of employer defined attributes in order to be hired. Not only does this mentality negate the varied assets job seekers bring to the table, but it also centers the employer as king. Here, individual bias and structural racism are allowed to flourish under the euphemisms of "professionalism" and "employability." But why do employers, who operate to uphold white supremacist culture, get to be the ones making these rules? What gets left out, unacknowledged, and undervalued when we operate in this "demand driven" way? Namely, perspectives of color.

As we embarked on this journey to define career readiness and develop corresponding curriculum, we found ourselves challenged by the typical language used to talk about this work. We wanted to change the narrative, to center

job seekers, particularly job seekers of color, as agents in their own journeys. We made a shift from "job readiness" to "career readiness" to better denote the long-term trajectory and pathways we wanted to connect job seekers with. We debated whether use of the term "executive functioning" only serves to further marginalize people of color as it's almost exclusively used in reference to these groups. We talked about the code switching people of color need to do in predominantly white workplaces and how to value these necessary workplace navigation skills. We lamented the fact that our field is called "workforce development", instead of the loftier "career navigation" found at colleges and universities. And we questioned the value of this project entirely as it doesn't address the biggest barrier of all for job seekers of color: employer bias.

In the midst of these rich, boundary bending conversations, we struggled to find the right words and language to move us away from these dominant narratives. While we agreed the traditional words would no longer do, good alternatives eluded us, or presented new problems. In the end, we realized forward progress lies in the debate, in the questioning. Because we didn't accept the historical premises of the workforce development system as immutable, we could define new approaches to doing the work. As you read this framework, we invite you to do the same. To question, challenge, and push back. Language and the ideas it conjures should always remain mutable, particularly as we continue to strive towards equity in our field.

WHAT WE KNOW

JOB READINESS TRAINING IN THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

Job readiness training is a requirement of nearly every public and private funder of workforce services, and yet, there is no one, universal definition of what it means to be “job ready” (let alone career ready!). And there are no standards or guidelines about what constitutes good training. Funders have typically deferred to the workforce organizations themselves to develop their own standards of job readiness and accompanying curriculum. While well-intentioned, this has merely left each organization to fend for itself. Job readiness instructors create their own curriculum, piecing together lessons from previous colleagues and whatever research they can cobble together. Since job readiness instruction is many times an “other duty as assigned” to already overworked frontline staff, instructors often don’t have the time to update their curriculum with best practices or emerging research trends. As a result, job readiness training looks drastically different from one organization to the next.

On paper, this might not be readily apparent as most job readiness trainings focus on similar content--bolstering and building “soft skills” while teaching job seekers the art of resume writing, interviewing, networking, and professional etiquette. *How* this content is delivered, however, can vary drastically from organization to organization. Differences in the length and frequency of programming, the skill and preparation of instructors, and the use (or not) of interactive and experiential



learning methods all contribute to vastly inconsistent experiences for job seekers. Over time, as workforce organizations have worked to perfect their programming, this variability has paradoxically become a point of proprietary pride. Job readiness training has become a major way organizations differentiate themselves, each often touting their own programming as the silver bullet to job seeker success. While this has shifted some over time, many workforce organizations are reluctant to share specifics about their training lest the “secret” gets out and their programming is no longer unique. No doubt this focus on remaining cutting-edge is driven, at least in part, by funder expectations. The need to differentiate, demonstrate how one is adding unique value to the field, constantly innovate and offer something new, is a hallmark of the nonprofit funding landscape. Though not inherently wrong, when it comes to job readiness, we don’t need flash and innovation, we need curriculum that works.

This is especially true when coupled with the knowledge we have about how job seekers access the workforce

development system. For many, program hopping is standard practice. This can be for a variety of reasons, many of which may not even be attributable to the workforce organizations themselves, including the state of the labor market, life timing, family emergencies, etc. That being said, at least some of this “hopping” is likely attributable to dissatisfaction with programmatic outcomes. Workforce organizations have limited ability to customize training to individual job seekers’ needs, so it is easier and more efficient to offer a one-size-fits-all training to an entire population of job seekers. When considering the variability of human needs, however, this one-size-fits-all approach coupled with the *requirement* that job seekers complete their programming before being connected to job opportunities, isn’t working. Forcing job seekers to sit through another job readiness training that promises to solve their economic stability issues is at best condescending and at worst, a lie. If job readiness trainings actually led to the improved outcomes *job seekers themselves* were seeking, the workforce development system would be revolutionized.



OUR RESEARCH

As a systemic intervention, current job readiness programming hasn't been working. Given this reality, the Chicago Jobs Council set out on a wholesale mission to understand what the best practices in job readiness delivery are, how they could be better woven into curriculum that works, and how the field



could improve its outcomes for job seekers.

In the mid 2010's, brain science research, while already an established field, was suddenly and more prominently being connected to workforce development programming. Researchers were pondering and studying the effect that behavioral economics, "nudging," and executive functioning had on adult job seekers participating in job readiness training. At the same time, social scientists and other practitioners were extolling the virtues of incorporating elements of social-emotional learning, cognitive behavioral therapy, trauma-informed care, cultural competency, racial equity, coaching, and goal setting into workforce development programming.

Through an extensive [literature review](#), [interviews with on-the-ground practitioners](#), and input from a [national advisory committee of experts](#), we set out to understand the following:

- What are the essential skills people need to succeed and thrive in life?
- What workplace navigation skills are valued by employers in today's labor market?
- How can the workforce development field support that skill development?

The literature review included the latest behavioral science research and best practices in job readiness training. This process of collecting, analyzing, and

codifying the behavioral-science informed interventions took almost eight months and resulted in a [mind map](#)¹ detailing the essential skills and strategies at the core of effective career readiness programs.

We also conducted a landscape scan of skills, behaviors, and mindsets needed for successful employment. Specifically, we researched employability skills and

mindsets (which we renamed Workplace Navigation Skills), cross-referenced these with skill frameworks from the U.S. Department of Education, National Research Council, and National Association of Colleges and Employers, as well as looked at direct reports from employers answering the question of what skills they look for in their job seekers.

WHAT ARE WORKPLACE NAVIGATION SKILLS AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Workplace Navigation Skills are a set of transferable or “soft” skills that are essential for effective performance in the workplace. Unlike technical or “hard” skills, these skills are generic in nature, and are common to all work roles and workplaces across all industry types. Workplace navigation skills are typically considered essential qualifications for many job positions and hence have become necessary for an individual's employment success at just about any level.

- **Communication:** The ability to explain what one means in a clear and concise way through written and verbal means. It also includes how one takes in and then interprets the verbal and non-verbal messages sent by others; how one listens and relates to other people; and how one acts upon key information/instructions.
- **Creativity:** The ability to perceive the world in new ways, to find hidden patterns, to make connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena, and to generate solutions.
- **Critical Thinking:** The capacity to carefully discern, analyze, and evaluate information; and determine how to interpret it in order to make a sound judgement. It also includes taking outside information into account during the thought process.
- **Decision Making:** The ability to make deliberate and thoughtful choices by gathering information, assessing options, considering alternatives, and taking action. It also includes evaluating one's choices and the consequences.
- **Leadership:** The ability to motivate, take responsibility for, and lead others effectively to accomplish objectives and goals.
- **Problem Solving:** The ability to understand a problem by breaking it down into smaller parts, and identifying the key issues, implications and identifying solutions. It also involves applying knowledge from many different areas to solving a task.
- **Teamwork & Collaboration:** The ability to work well with other people from different disciplines, backgrounds, and expertise to accomplish a task or goal.

1. Primary research studies grounding our work:

- Cavadel, E.W., Kauff, J., Anderson, M.A., McConnell, S., & Derr, M. (2017). Self-Regulation and Goal Attainment: A New Perspective for Employment Programs. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016). Building Core Capabilities for Life: The Science Behind the Skills Adults Need to Succeed in Parenting and in the Workplace. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
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- Center for Applied Behavioral Science (2018). The Future of Executive-Skills Coaching and Behavioral Science in Programs that Serve Teens and Young Adults. New York, NY: MDRC.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Through our research, we learned many things, the most important of which is that the **how** of job readiness training is more important than the **what**. In other words, the strategies used to deliver job readiness content actually matter more than the content of what is delivered. Unfortunately this is where a majority of job readiness trainings fall short. Integration of executive function skills, customized goal-attainment strategies, and a coaching framework is highly individualized work and takes a significant investment of time from both workforce development staff and the job seeker. Implementing this type of intensive programming requires a wholesale culture shift within the workforce development field, rigorous training of frontline and executive level staff, and updating of job readiness curriculum, program policies, and organizational operations.

Below are the following major takeaways of our research:

1. *Executive Function Skills are Essential*

First, effective job readiness programs must focus on building and strengthening executive function skills in order to have the greatest impact on job seekers' outcomes. Executive function skills enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. The brain needs these skills to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses.

And, researchers have identified that these skills play an important role in an individual's success in setting and achieving goals. To really be effective, however, programs need to incorporate active executive function -based strategies into all aspects of the program design and delivery, not just the curriculum. As Elisabeth Babcock says, "Programs wishing to support clients in improving executive function skills might think about the process as one of first developing and then regularly practicing new routines of thought and behavior. Because new neural connections are built through repeated use, program designers should think about the specific habits and behaviors they hope to change and then create concrete program opportunities for participants to repeatedly practice these habits of thought or behavior."²

While we all have executive function skills, some may be stronger or weaker depending on the opportunities we've had to hone our skills. Challenging life circumstances, trauma, and stress all impact the development and display of executive functioning skills. And for all of us, anxiety, poor sleep, lack of exercise, and poor nutrition makes accessing these skills more difficult. However, "Improvements in executive functioning are likely to positively impact outcomes in all areas of life, including parenting, personal relationships, money management, educational attainment, and career success."³

2. Babcock, E. (2018). *Harnessing the Power of High Expectations: Using Brain Science to Coach for Breakthrough Outcomes*. Boston, MA: Economic Mobility Pathways.
3. Babcock, E. (2014). *Using Brain Science to Design New Pathways Out of Poverty*. Boston, MA: Crittenton Women's Union.

WHAT ARE EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Executive function skills are a set of mental processes that all have to do with managing oneself and one's resources in order to achieve a goal. It is an umbrella term for the neurologically-based skills involving mental control and self-regulation. Executive function skills⁴ can be broken down into three broad categories, each with specific sub skills:

How we organize and plan things:

- **Organization:** The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.
- **Planning/Prioritization:** The ability to create a road map to reach a goal or to complete a task. It also involves being able to make decisions about what is important to focus on and what is not important.
- **Time Management:** The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. It also involves a sense that time is important.

How we react to things:

- **Emotional Control:** The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.
- **Flexibility:** The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information, or mistakes. It relates to an adaptability to changing conditions.
- **Response Inhibition:** The capacity to think before you act – this ability to resist the urge to say or do something allows us the time to evaluate a situation and how our behavior might impact it.
- **Stress Tolerance:** The ability to work in stressful situations and to cope with uncertainty, change, and performance demands.

How we get things done:

- **Goal-Directed Persistence:** The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of that goal, and not be put off or distracted by competing interests.
- **Metacognition:** The ability to stand back and take a bird's eye view of yourself in a situation, to observe how you problem-solve. It also includes self-monitoring and self-evaluative skills.
- **Sustained Attention:** The capacity to maintain attention to a situation or task in spite of distractibility, fatigue, or boredom.
- **Task Initiation:** The ability to begin projects without undue procrastination, in an efficient or timely fashion.
- **Working Memory:** The ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks. It incorporates the ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to the situation at hand or to project into the future.

4. Guare, R., Dawson, P., & Guare, C. (2017). Executive Skills Coaching with Adults Affected by Conditions of Poverty and Stress. Fort Collins, CO: Tua-Path LLC.



2. *A Goal Attainment Process that is Client-Led is Most Impactful*

Second, allowing job seekers to set and pursue their own goals leads to better long-term participant outcomes. The goal setting and attainment process must be client-led in order to be impactful--participants must set and pursue their own goals. The ability of workforce staff to help job seekers do this *and* hold them accountable, is essential to goal attainment. "New evidence from neuroscience, psychology, and other behavioral sciences suggests that employment programs may be able to improve participants' long-term outcomes by enhancing their ability to set and pursue their own goals, and that specific skills, behaviors, and mindsets are critical to goal achievement."⁵

An important part of helping clients set and achieve goals is the modification of the program environment. As the Chicago-based workforce development social enterprise, New Moms, has learned adapting "the physical space as well as the policies, processes, materials, technology, and tasks we ask of participants can decrease the cognitive tax on participants and give them more bandwidth to align their behaviors with their motivations and focus on progression towards their goals. Removing environmental barriers to success can increase program engagement, and is a practical, and often inexpensive and quick, method to increase the likelihood of participants' goal achievement."⁶

5. Cavadel, E.W., Kauff, J.F., Person, A., & Kahn-Kravis, T. (2018). *New Perspectives on Practice: A Guide to Measuring Self-Regulation and Goal-Related Outcomes in Employment Programs*. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research.
6. New Moms and Global Learning Partners, Inc. (2019). *Implementing an Executive Skills Approach: Insights for the Field*. Chicago, IL: New Moms.

WHAT IS A GOAL ATTAINMENT PROCESS AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

A goal attainment process can help participants strengthen and build their executive function skills by supporting them as they identify goals that are challenging, achievable, and meaningful; and develop a plan and take action to achieve these goals. In addition to directly building skills, this approach can facilitate the development of a supportive environment and reduce sources of stress, both of which play an important role in a participant's ability to apply their executive function skills.

Key elements of a goal attainment process⁷ include:

- Staff act as facilitators, **helping participants to set goals that are meaningful to them** and within their reach.
- Goals are broken down into **small steps** that are achievable within the time available, and scaffolded into larger, more complex and longer-term goals over time.
- **Detailed action plans** identify when, where and how each task will be completed.
- **Participants** (not staff) **identify potential obstacles and strategies for overcoming them** before they occur.
- **Ongoing support** is provided when participants are putting their plans into action.
- Regular meetings are **intentional and purposeful and focused on reviewing and revising goals and plans.**

3. *A Coaching Approach Leads to Lasting Change*

And finally, the coaching model or approach is the most effective way to actively build executive function skills and affect goal attainment. Coaching seeks to both intentionally build the skills and mindsets necessary for sustained behavior change through repeated practice and reinforcement, as well as (and perhaps more importantly), help individuals recognize skills they

already have that can be transferred to a new context. “Coaching improves individuals’ ability to self-regulate; to make informed, future-oriented decisions that lead to economic mobility. These skills and mindsets are built up through interaction with others, and they are built over time through repeated practice; a relatively long-term coaching relationship is the best place to see real growth.”⁸

7. Pavetti, L. (2018). Goal, Plan, Do, Review and Revise: An Executive Function-Informed Goal Achievement Framework for Use in Human Service Programs. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

8. Ruiz de Luzuriaga, N. (2015). Coaching For Economic Mobility. Boston, MA: Crittenton Women's Union.

WHAT IS COACHING AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The International Coach Federation says that coaching is “partnering with participants in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.” A coaching approach means working with participants from a resourceful and strength-based point of view, collaborating to explore opportunities, identify resources, and take action. Notably, this approach places the job seeker in the lead, with staff playing a critical supporting role.

The coaching approach⁹ assumes the following:

- **Every participant is creative, capable, and resourceful.** Though participants may struggle with big roadblocks and issues, they’re creative and resourceful enough to have their own answers and know what’s right for them.
- **To give individuals the power to gain long-term stability, you should focus on strengths instead of weaknesses and barriers.** In a traditional case management model, the focus is typically on barrier removal. Coaching is different. Coaching focuses on strengths: what is working, what is the goal, what resources are available to draw on? Barriers are identified and addressed in the process of coaching, but are not the focus.
- **Coaches create environments that make change possible.** People need trust and a positive atmosphere in which to feel safe and take new risks. Coaching helps foster change by delivering services focused on positive reinforcement. Coaches build trust, rapport, and high expectations for what is possible.
- **Greater self-awareness leads to increased performance and fulfillment.** Once a participant has more awareness, they can begin making increased connections between their skills, behaviors, and goals. This can perhaps lead to more empowered outlooks and habits.
- **Change ripples outward.** As participants begin to experience change in one area of their lives, they often are more motivated to make changes in other areas as well.
- **Each individual is different; individual’s rates of change vary over time and tasks.** Success will look different for each person, as will the amount of support they need along the way. Tailoring the coach approach to give each person the amount of support they need to be successful is part of a scaffolded approach to service delivery and a cornerstone of the coaching model.

9. The Prosperity Agenda (2016). Career and Life Coaching Training Toolkit. Seattle, WA: The Prosperity Agenda.

OUR SOLUTION

Incorporating behavioral science informed interventions and a racial equity approach, this approach to career readiness aims to create a culture shift in workforce organizations that transforms how job seekers are served. And because the *how* matters more than the *what*, that's where the focus of our solution lies.

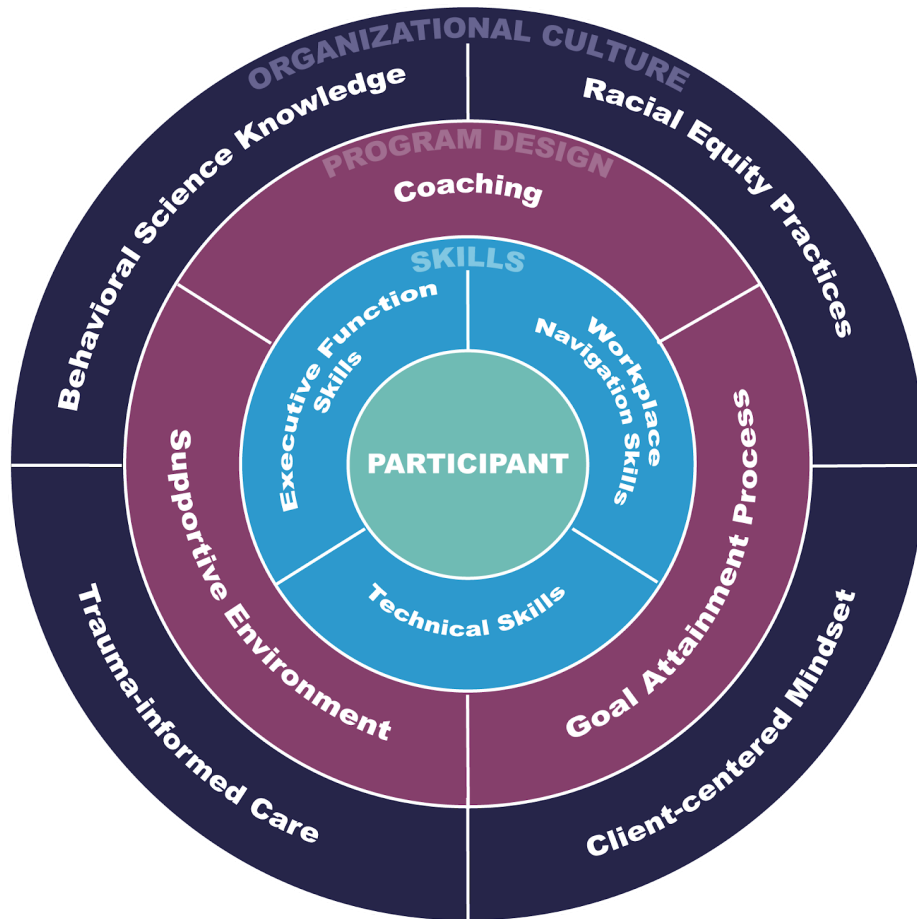
In an attempt to reduce the racial disparities in employment and income for job seekers of color, our solution starts with **education and training**. While career readiness instructors are our target audience, we know that wholesale shifts in outcomes can't

happen until *all* staff understand the following:

- The fundamentals of executive functioning skills and best practices in brain science research
- The intersection of individual and cultural trauma, racial equity, and the labor market
- Creating a client-centered environment that allows job seekers to focus on their skill building
- Techniques that support active skill development and display, including coaching, motivational interviewing, and the goal attainment process.



The graphic below outlines our theory of change.



First, we center the job seeker. What all job seekers need in order to advance their careers is an understanding and mastery of their executive functioning, workplace navigation, and technical skills. These are the skills typically taught, to varying degrees, in job readiness programming across the workforce development system.

The next layer, *how* these skills are developed, is where our intervention diverges from “business as usual.” Through coaching, the goal attainment process, and the establishment of a supportive environment, the assets job seekers already have can be strengthened, and new capabilities can

emerge. Intentional program design that incorporates *all* of these elements takes a significant investment of time and resources. It requires more individualization, a move away from “one size fits all.”

However, none of the programmatic shifts an organization might make will be successful unless the following have been woven into the fabric of the organizational culture:

- Knowledge and adoption of behavioral science research
- Racial equity practices
- Trauma-informed approach
- Client-centered mindset

Depending on the organization, this cultural shift might be a massive undertaking or a smaller endeavor. Regardless, it depends on the willingness of executive leadership to push their organizations and staff towards this new way of thinking and doing business. This is not easy. In some cases, staff will be required to change their hearts, minds, and behavior. However, without all of these elements in place, the workforce field is in danger of doing the same old things and hoping for a different result.

To supplement the education and training our solution provides for career readiness staff, we have also developed a career readiness curriculum that can be deployed with a variety of populations and program models to facilitate job seekers' development and awareness of their own executive functioning and workplace navigation skills. The curriculum includes both a facilitator guide for group and individual coaching

conversations, as well as participant workbook pages. The content of the curriculum includes a menu of mix-and-match activities related to the job search, including:

- Personal Skills, Interests, & Values
- Career Exploration & Planning
- Resume & Cover Letters
- Personal Pitch
- Networking
- Job Searching & Job Applications
- Interviewing
- Workplace Navigation

It is our intent that this training around curriculum delivery and facilitation, the how, coupled with concrete job search curriculum and activities grounded in brain science research, the what, will positively impact outcomes for people of color in the workforce development system.



CONCLUSION

While we set out with the singular goal of improving job readiness programming for the field, we ended with the realization that the workforce development system is in need of a seismic culture shift. Business as usual doesn't work anymore (if it really ever did?!) and job seekers deserve better.

Our research has shown us that to decrease racial disparities in the labor market and improve employment outcomes for people of color, a key place to start is with the training of frontline staff. These “first responders” serve as social workers, counselors, cheerleaders, case workers, data entry specialists, and more. To be even remotely effective, they must be equipped with the information, skills, tools, and strategies required to wear these multiple hats. But it's not just frontline staff. Everyone at a workforce organization--from the receptionist to the quality improvement manager to the executive director--must be committed to understanding how individual and cultural trauma intersects with the development and display of executive functioning skills. And use this understanding to develop transformative workforce programming “targeted to those most impacted by social bias, persistent poverty, and systemic inequity”.¹⁰

That being said, we also recognize that this framework is only an incremental solution to the much larger problem of institutional and systemic bias. Supporting executive skill development in our workforce programming doesn't solve for employer bias in hiring. It doesn't solve for labor market inequities, like the scarcity of quality, high-paying jobs or the geographic mismatch between workers and jobs or the lack of affordable child care. Advocacy efforts, policy reforms, and other carrot/stick approaches are necessary to radically transform the capitalist culture that perpetuates and produces these inequalities. Like any vision worth fighting for, the journey is long. And so, while we work to dismantle the system and build a new, more just future, we also work *within* the system to create change in the now. Job seekers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with employer dictated “skills.” They, we, are human beings who bring our own knowledge, experience, skills, and interests to the world of work. As professionals tasked with recognizing this value, we need to examine our “helper” narrative, to look critically at the ways our policies, practices and outcome metrics enforce rather than upend racial inequities. In short, we need to do better.

10. Babcock, E. (2014). Using Brain Science to Design New Pathways Out of Poverty. Boston, MA: Crittenton Women's Union.

APPENDIX A - LITERATURE REVIEW

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APPENDIX B - INTERVIEWS

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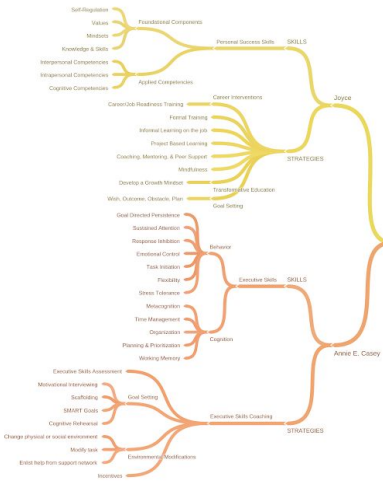
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One Million Degrees

Rebekah Kikama
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Ruthie Liberman
Economic Mobility Pathways

APPENDIX C - MIND MAP

diggle
 Photo by Kenia Rodriguez



Career Readiness Framework - Behavioral Science Research

