



Advancing Our Future: A Strategy Playbook for Frontline Career Advancement of Early Talent

Lessons learned from Gap Inc's This Way Onward Alumni Program

AT A GLANCE

Reimagine your talent development strategy with our playbook tailored for early talent in frontline roles. Using this playbook, you'll learn how Gap Inc. navigated early talent needs while optimizing their internal advancement strategy. You will also learn how to drive inclusivity, retention, and advancement through actionable strategies and cutting-edge tools and elevate your internal talent development for a resilient and diverse workforce.

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About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. www.jff.org.

About JFF's Language Choices

JFF is committed to using language that promotes equity and human dignity, rooted in the strengths of the people and communities we serve. We develop our content with the awareness that language can perpetuate privilege but also can educate, empower, and drive positive change to create a more equitable society. We will continually reevaluate our efforts as language usage continues to evolve.

About Partner Company

Gap Inc., a collection of purpose-led lifestyle brands, is the largest American specialty apparel company offering clothing, accessories, and personal care products for men, women, and children under the [Old Navy](#), [Gap](#), [Banana Republic](#), and [Athleta](#) brands. Gap Inc. is guided by its purpose, Inclusive, by Design, and takes pride in creating products and experiences its customers love while doing right by its employees, communities, and planet.

A division of San Francisco-based Gap Inc., Old Navy brings a fun, energizing shopping environment to its customers in more than 1,200 stores around the world. For more information, please visit www.oldnavy.com.

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Goals & Purpose of this Playbook

A new generation of professionals has arrived, bringing with them fresh perspectives, and unique expectations. These “early talent” workers—individuals of diverse backgrounds in the early stages of their pathway towards economic advancement, regardless of age — possess immense potential to contribute and reshape the workforce and are already having a substantial impact. For corporate leaders, it is crucial to recognize and tap into this talent pool, especially among those who have historically faced barriers to advancement.

Yet the reality many early talent workers in frontline positions have faced, particularly those of color without college degrees, has been exclusion from sustainable, quality career advancement opportunities. But we have the power to change that narrative. Many companies are already investing in the career development of early talent workers that include Black, Latinx, and Indigenous individuals. From a social responsibility perspective, such efforts create new avenues for growth and access to quality jobs that help close enduring racial wealth gaps and occupational segregation.

From a business perspective, it makes strategic and financial sense to invest in internal talent development rather than continuously seeking and onboarding new hires. However, operationalizing strategies, programs, and policies to shepherd a new generation of talent into high-quality jobs remains a challenge, amplified by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, widening racial wealth gaps, and a shifting labor market.^{1,2}

To help corporate leaders address these challenges and seize the underlying opportunity, Jobs for the Future (JFF) is showcasing companies that are “leading the way” in their commitments to improve career navigation and advancement for early talent within their companies. One such employer is Gap Inc., the largest specialty retailer in the United States and comprised of a collection of purpose-led lifestyle brands, including Athleta, Banana Republic, Gap and Old Navy. The American Opportunity Index has also recognized Gap Inc. as one of the top retail companies for growing talent internally—filling roles by promoting within.³

In partnership with JFF, Gap Inc. recently underwent an effort to build upon the success of Old Navy's signature social impact program This Way ONward (TWO), an early career exploration and mentorship initiative focused on reaching Black and Latinx individuals aged 16 to 24 at Old Navy stores across North America⁴ Gap Inc.'s work aimed to integrate an ongoing strategy for supporting TWO alumni in career advancement by expanding the program's reach to help connect participants to unique and equitable development opportunities.

As a pioneer in creating and sustaining career development opportunities for young people, Gap Inc. understood the importance of not only helping individuals enter the workforce, but also connecting them to experiences and opportunities that promote individualized and equitable career advancement.



The purpose of this playbook is to fuel the implementation of new practices, tools, and technologies that will help employers and their partners better support, include, retain, and advance early talent in frontline positions.

Drawing from insights and experiences from JFF's partnership with Gap Inc., JFF's ongoing work to create a platform for corporate change through the [Impact Employer Model](#), as well as recent research and best practices, we encourage employers to adapt the actionable strategies presented in this playbook to your unique environments or setups.

Sizing & Understanding the Opportunity In Your Industry



In the immediate wake of the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, frontline retail workers of color experienced significant and alarming job losses. Now, just a couple of years later, many retail workers chose not to return or are considering leaving their roles due to lack of flexibility and career development opportunities.⁵ Retail employers have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to address these challenges and leverage investments in career advancement as an effective economic recovery strategy.

It is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of the workforce composition and their experiences. The following snapshot provides key data from the retail industry that informed the strategies and supports outlined in this playbook.

We recommend that companies, particularly those in industries employing large numbers of frontline workers, gather similar data on indicators such as gender and racial representation, wages, economic mobility, attrition, and more. By utilizing and disaggregating data across dimensions of race, ethnicity, and background, employers can maximize the impact of their investments and initiatives to support and advance early talent.

Retail Industry Data Snapshot

 <p>DEMOGRAPHICS</p>	 <p>RACIAL/ETHNIC DISPARITIES</p>	 <p>INDUSTRY TRENDS AND CHALLENGES</p>
<p>The Retail Industry is Multigenerational with varied educational backgrounds</p>	<p>Black and Latinx retail workers do not have the same opportunities for advancement as their white peers</p>	<p>The industry is not meeting retail workers' needs and expectations to support long-term retention</p>
<p>Two-thirds of the industry is under 35, and one-third is between the ages of 16 and 25, but the median age is still 31.⁶</p>	<p>On average, however, white workers make more than their Black and Latinx counterparts in the same role.⁷</p>	<p>There has been more than a three-quarters (75.8%) turnover rate for all hourly in-store positions. That's up from 68% in 2021. In 2022, the turnover rate for store managers and assistant store managers was 17.7% and 29.2% respectively, up from 14.6% and 22% in 2021.⁸</p>
<p>Workers tend to identify as women who do not have a college degree, yet more than a third have a bachelor's degree or higher.⁹</p>	<p>There are few management/ supervisory roles relative to the number of frontline positions, and when frontline workers advance to those limited spots, they tend to be white.¹⁰</p>	<p>Frontline jobs could be a launching pad for careers, but today there is just one frontline salaried position for every 20 frontline hourly jobs, reinforcing the need for pathways within and across industries.¹¹</p>
<p>The largest percentage of workers identify as non-Hispanic white workers, but Black and Latinx workers are over-represented in low-paying retail jobs (esp. cashier) as compared to overall workforce participation in other industries¹²</p>	<p>Despite comparable education and work experience, 17% of black and 13% of Latino retail workers live below the poverty line, compared to 9% of the retail workforce overall¹³</p>	<p>A trust deficit exists between Black employees and their companies. A trust deficit reflects Black employee perceptions of their workplace as less fair, accepting, and authentic. For example, Black employees are 23% less likely to receive “a lot” or “quite a bit” of support to advance, 41% less likely to view promotions as fair, and 39% less likely to believe their company's DEI programs are effective than white employees in the same company.¹⁴</p>

DEMOGRAPHICS	RACIAL/ETHNIC DISPARITIES	INDUSTRY TRENDS AND CHALLENGES
<p>More than 1 in 5 retail trade workers are people of color. Women of color in particular are overrepresented in these jobs: Specifically, 1 in 4 employed Hispanic women work in these industries.^{15 16}</p>	<p>Black and Latino full-time retail salespersons earn 75% of the wages of their white peers.¹⁷</p>	<p>In a recent McKinsey study, the number-one driver of attrition was flexibility; number two was lack of career development opportunities¹⁸</p>
	<p>Frontline jobs largely do not connect Black employees with sufficient opportunities to advance. Among participating companies, data shows Black employees are overrepresented in frontline jobs (18 percent) compared with managerial jobs (9 percent).¹⁹</p>	



Data Insights & Implications

Though different industries should collect their own data on workforce trends, the information above offers insights into where opportunities exist for employer action to support the advancement of early talent in frontline roles through the perspective of the retail industry.

- 1 One third of retail workers are aged 16 to 25, and much of the industry's workforce is multi-generational.** Frontline retail and sales positions offer many individuals—like those participating in Gap Inc.'s TWO program at Old Navy—first paid job experience.
- 2 Stark disparities in wages and career advancement persist among racial and ethnic groups throughout the industry.** This trend highlights the urgent need for employers to integrate equitable advancement strategies and talent practices throughout the employee life cycle.
- 3 Employees leave their jobs due to lack of flexibility and limited career development opportunities.** This suggests that improving employer brand reputation and implementing practices, policies, and communications strategies that address employees' challenges head-on can be effective and important strategies for businesses.

There is no one-size-fits-all strategy or program that can address the unique career development needs of all retail employees or the industry's most pressing challenges. Embracing multi-pronged strategies—tailored to each employer's context, constraints, and priorities—is the starting point for realizing desired business *and* worker outcomes.



Strategies to Support Frontline Worker Advancement

Informed by lessons learned from JFF's partnership with Gap Inc. to pilot an evolution of This Way ONward (TWO), as well as JFF's Impact Employer Framework, we recommend corporate leaders implement the following inclusive talent practices to unlock the potential of early talent workers in frontline. These strategies are particularly important for young adults, as research shows that access to a quality job and continued employment in one's 20s can significantly impact future wages and overall income.^{20 21 22}

Strategy 1: Define & Expand Pathways to Advancement

Employers should establish a modern "2.0" definition of what advancement means at their company, encompassing areas like internal mobility and succession planning processes, external partnerships, employee engagement programs that support retention, and more.

Traditionally, career advancement is associated with a linear progression within the same industry or job function and company. But this narrow vision of growth overlooks the complex contributing factors of career advancement and undermines individuals' ability to develop valuable transferable skills essential to accessing higher-paying and higher-quality jobs over time.

For Gap Inc., their "2.0" definition of advancement centers on multidimensional experiences and wraparound supports that provide frontline workers opportunities to expand job responsibilities, learn new skills, and open the door to career pathways both within and beyond the Gap Inc. enterprise.



Guiding Questions:

- How does your company define career advancement for frontline workers?
- What are ways to support individualized career journeys?



Key Actions:

- Promote Advancement that Honors Worker Voice and Choice
- Utilize Skill-Based Talent Practices
- Create Opportunities to Build Social Capital

Action: Promote Advancement that Honors Worker Voice and Choice

At Gap Inc., environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) leaders introduced different supports, resources, and company assets available to employees with varying interests and aspirations. Before embarking on efforts to introduce programming for alumni of the TWO program, the company collected and analyzed internal data from workers at Old Navy stores. So, Gap Inc. developed strategies to help further understand alumni's career aspirations by supporting a mentorship role for store managers towards frontline workers. One such example is the development of a career advancement survey tool developed in partnership with JFF that store managers, peers, and Community Based Organizations (CBO) can use to ascertain frontline workers' career goals and overall job satisfaction.

The survey will aid store managers in facilitating conversations with frontline workers on career advancement opportunities and help identify appropriate short and long-term plans according to employees' goals. Another benefit of these flexible tools is that they enable teams to understand career paths while also determining ways employees could move across business functions.

Action: Utilize Skills-Based Talent Practices

Skills can present barriers or build bridges depending on workers' access to training and development opportunities. Employers can provide critical opportunities for their employees to learn new skills that allow them to apply for different jobs within their current companies or pivot to other industries. Using the career development tool mentioned above, Gap Inc. can make it easier for Old Navy store managers to have ongoing and informal conversations with employees about areas of interest to support skill development. Employers can provide opportunities for frontline workers to job shadow and cross-train in different departments or roles. This can help them gain exposure to different areas of the business and develop new skills.



Action: Create Opportunities to Build Social Capital

Building professional social capital—the professional resources we access from our web of working relationships with those around us—is an essential and necessary step in the world of work.²³ A professional network connects workers to career opportunities through different perspectives, and is a critical, yet often overlooked, element to equitable economic advancement.

TWO provides individuals opportunities to build relationships with mentors, peers, and store leaders that offer encouragement and advice throughout their career journey. Developing social capital within a company provides early talent workers with firsthand, real-world examples of what career advancement looks like.

More importantly, coaching and training provides context on the how: how to build, maintain, and activate networks vital for long-term career development. Connecting with, learning from, and supporting one's peers—especially in a close-knit, longer-term cohort experience—can also be an effective way to access an ongoing stream of introductions and connections to job opportunities.



Strategy 2: Create Intentional Springboards

One of the most effective ways employers can create these individualized career paths is by investing in community-based organizations that have deep expertise to build relationships with early talent.

Frontline retail jobs are often a worker's first introduction into the professional world, and therefore, can be powerful springboards that set individuals on a path to meaningful quality jobs. However, this potential is contingent on the strength of the web of services that support these jobs. As the retail industry data snapshot shows, frontline workers need flexible resources and support to adapt to meet their unique needs.



Guiding Question:

- How can your company apply holistic career services into your talent development strategies to support frontline workers individualized career journeys?



Key Actions:

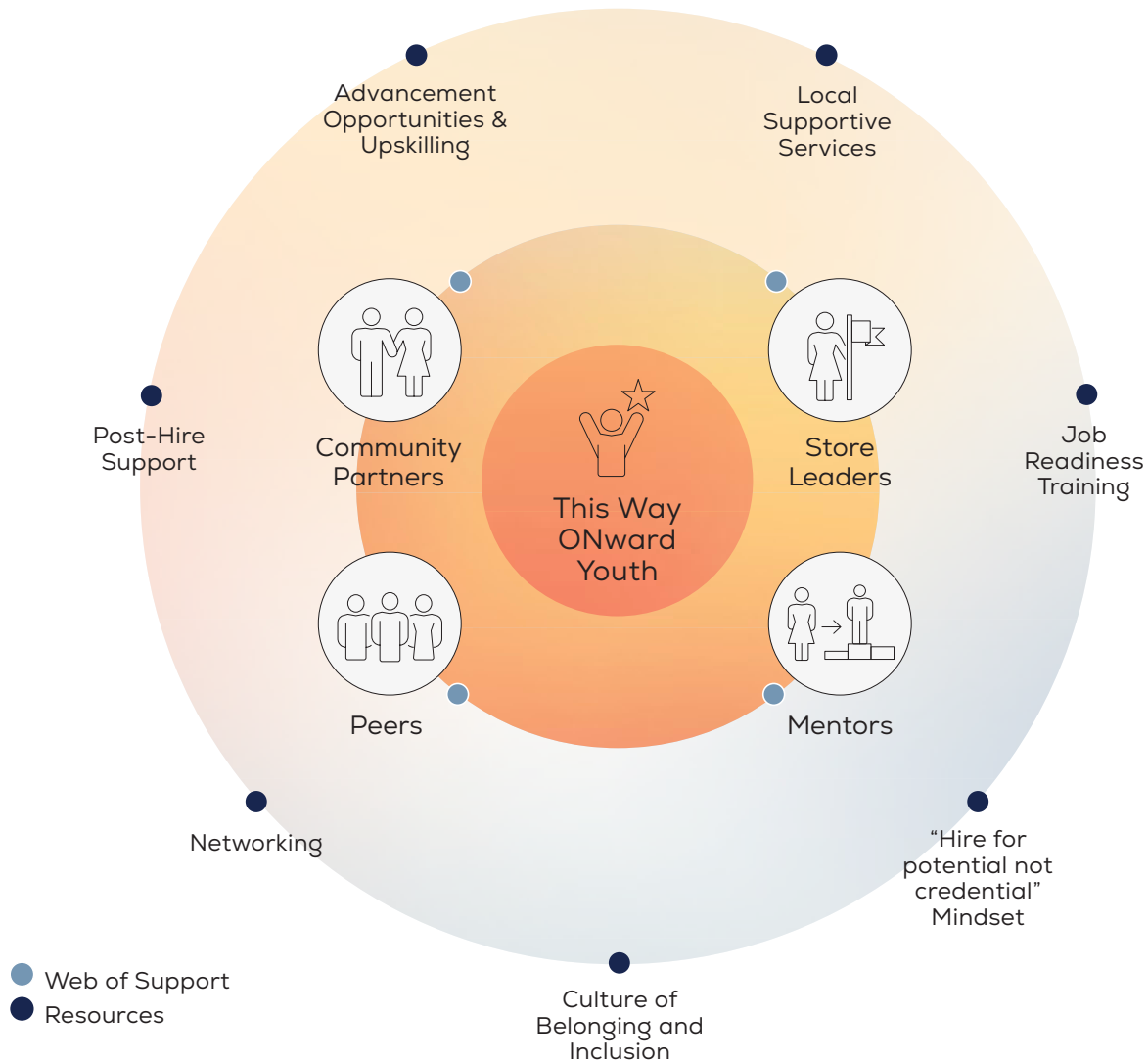
- Holistic Career Navigation
- Cultivating an Industry Talent Pool

Action: Holistic Career Navigation

High-quality career navigation services consist of a collection of community partnerships and other resources designed to help early talent workers make informed choices about their employment, training, and educational options. To be equitable and inclusive, career navigation services should address individuals' interests and talents and help people adopt a growth mindset, engage in self-advocacy, and combat barriers based on race and class.

Partnerships with other organizations are one of the most important investments employers can make to maximize their advancement initiatives for frontline workers. More specifically, these organizations can help employers connect workers with a local ecosystem of support and mentors who act as an example of career advancement, including peers, family members, CBOs, educational institutions, and other local partners. Partnerships also make it easier for employers who may not have the internal bandwidth to provide full-service support for employee career navigation.

Brick and mortar store locations in local communities already possess name recognition that attracts early talent workers. As such, Gap Inc. knew they could maximize their impact through investing in a web of local support and partnership strategies via the TWO program. This includes introductions to job readiness programs, local supportive services, upskilling opportunities, and post-hire support. A support network offered by a company connects workers with advancement resources while also promoting a company culture of belonging and inclusion. Below is a framework laying out the interconnected roles played by networking groups who support a TWO participant's career journey.²⁴



Action: Cultivating an Industry Talent Pool

In today’s economic and cultural landscape, it’s important that employers embrace a focus on “promoting out.” In 2021, The Schultz Family Foundation, in partnership with Lightcast data, published the [American Opportunity Index](#). This first-of-its-kind employer score card rates 50 of top companies across several measurement domains associated with advancement and movement into jobs with greater benefits, pay, etc. Within the Index, “promoting out” is a key measurement domain of companies associated with “career launchpads”—hiring workers with little experience and providing opportunities for advancement to positions elsewhere. Leaders in this field support skill development for entry-level workers so they can move on to career advances at other jobs.

While this approach may seem counterintuitive, companies could find benefits in this approach: It expands their referral network by supporting workers to stay in the ecosystem and could even incentivize them to return to the company with new skillsets as boomerang hires.²⁵

Strategy 3: Play the Short and Long Game

To ensure overall effectiveness, maintain momentum, and build buy-in with internal stakeholders, it is crucial to understand how to achieve and track short-term and long-term wins as it pertains to employee expectations and overall company goals.

To measure short-term gains, focus on the progress made in aligning career goals at individual level for an employee over the last six to 24 months. For long-term gains, compare the effectiveness in supporting targeted populations at a group-level over the course of several years.



Guiding Question:

- How can your company intentionally capture progress that demonstrates both ROI and equitable outcomes for frontline workers?



Key Actions:

- Measure with Intentionality
- Set Measurable Goals
- Let Job Quality Outcomes Drive Success
- Leverage Internal Infrastructure
- Pilot, Test & Iterate

Action: Measure with Intentionality

To maximize benefits of a career advancement program, companies must measure with intentionality to ensure a program is effective in promoting growth, retention, inclusivity and belonging--that is, prioritizing individual progression within a specified timeframe. Analyzing individual data can provide insights into overall satisfaction, learning journey, and social capital growth over a period of **up to two years**. Long-term metrics should encompass both individual and group impacts, emphasizing job satisfaction and external impacts of career advancement support. Companies should track job advancement outcomes and trends, as well as the quality of positions attained through program involvement, over a period of **several years**.

JFF worked closely with Gap Inc., to develop a set of measurement domains that could be used to measure short-term and long-term gains of their TWO program. Though each company may adopt their own distinct domains that could be used that align with internal processes, below are examples informed by JFF's partnership with Gap, Inc., as well as other research and best practices in equitable career development.

Short Term Measurement Domains:

Measurement Domain	Potential Data Stories & Metrics
Self-Efficacy and Satisfaction	Employee's beliefs about their capabilities to perform actions Employee satisfaction
Professional Social Capital	Employees' success in developing and expanding their network
Learning Journey	Participation in education and training programs Credential completion
Career Navigation & Onboarding	Satisfaction and sense of ease in navigational supports Satisfaction with onboarding supports, including during role transitions or promotions
Job Quality	Employee's demonstrated progress toward and access to the next steps in their career journey

Long Term Measurement Domains:

Measurement Domain	Potential Data Stories & Metrics
Career Navigation & Onboarding	Movement across jobs and industries Postsecondary attainment
Job Quality	Employees success in advancing to quality jobs within and beyond the company
Wealth Building	Influence of programming on employee wealth building opportunities and behaviors
Community & Family Well-Being	Impact of individuals gaining access to higher quality jobs on their families, communities, and the economy

Action: Set Measurable Goals

Ambitious yet achievable goals ensure a company has a roadmap to meet outcomes and sends a message to customers investors and the public that they are serious about making a change. It can also inspire innovation within the company and give it a competitive advantage over other businesses.

For example, Gap Inc. outlined specific goals outlined for its TWO program: Hire 5% of Old Navy entry-level employees through TWO annually by 2025 and reach a total of 20,000 youth since the start of the program in 2007.²⁶ We encourage organizations to set their own measurable goals that reinforce their commitment to equitable change.

Action: Let Job Quality Outcomes Drive Success

A key metric measuring equitable and inclusive career advancement is individual access to job quality—sustainable wages, benefits, predictable scheduling, career advancement opportunities, and more. Resources such as [JFF's Quality Jobs Framework](#) and the U.S. Department Labor's [Good Jobs Initiative](#) are examples of ways to define job quality and measure the economic wellbeing for workers. Long-term outcomes include full-time employment opportunities with employer-sponsored healthcare benefits and retirement savings plans that can positively affect individual financial status. Strong achievable and measurable outcomes like these demonstrate a company's commitment to supporting personal growth, employee wellbeing, retention, and engagement.



Action: Leverage Internal Infrastructure

When setting parameters for career advancement strategies, lean on existing processes and programs that can help support metrics setting and breakdown information silos across CSR, talent acquisition, DEI, and C-Suite. Gap Inc. used their social impact program as the basis for testing new approaches to career advancement, but they also relied on additional internal procedures and partners across business functions:

- **Working groups:** Internal groups that develop and implement strategies to support advancement programs. Activities include operationalizing, raising potential issues to leadership, and advising on strategy and policy. Gap Inc. utilized a working group of representatives across ESG, talent acquisition, HR, operations, and L&D to lead testing and piloting efforts to determine measurable outcomes that would support long-term scaling.
 - **Job codes:** Gap Inc. set up a separate job code in their HR systems to “tag” anyone who gets hired through TWO. This added metric helped the company track business outcomes such as retention, performance, promotion, and diversity generated through the model.
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Action: Pilot, Test, and Iterate

Creating a smaller pilot program in select locations that can be tested and refined can help organizations implement and commit to a full-scale career advancement program over time. This enables a company to capture data insights and firsthand accounts that can help determine the right strategies and tools needed for larger-scale implementation.

Gap Inc. launched a pilot program to test and evolve the TWO program. They partnered with JFF to reimagine the employer’s role and responsibility in promoting inclusive economic advancement of early talent at Old Navy stores, with a focus on supporting Black and Latinx youth. Through piloting this program, Gap Inc., tested alumni engagement, support, networking, mentorship, and skill development through an alumni training series. The company also tested training and upskilling for their store leaders. Data from the pilot proved helpful in identifying learnings and opportunities for further refinement.

Conclusion

Early talent frontline workers are the backbone of many critical industries across our economy. Informed by JFF's work with Gap Inc. and dozens of other Impact Employers, the strategies captured in this playbook are practical approaches to consider for unlocking the potential of the next generation, enabling their economic advancement.

We encourage companies from all industries that employ frontline workers to consider (and adapt) the strategies outlined by JFF's work with Gap Inc. and dozens of other Impact Employers to unlock the potential of the next generation and enable their economic advancement. Initiate conversations within your organization to define what equitable career advancement could look like for both frontline workers and your company first and then commit to action. Employers wield the transformative power to move millions of workers towards quality jobs and the chance for a better life. Along the way, you'll find that these efforts also enhance your business' success. If you're passionate about supporting early talent in frontline occupations, connect with us on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), or [Facebook](#), or subscribe to our [mailing list](#) to discover opportunities to learn, collaborate, and invest with JFF.

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Building a Future
That Works
For Everyone