

# How to Use Tech to Engage Young People in Career Navigation



## AT A GLANCE

An in-depth look at the ways youth reengagement centers use digital tools in the career navigation services they offer disconnected young people reveals best practices for tech-enabled, people-centered approaches.

There are nearly 50 million 16-to-24-year-olds in the United States and nearly 5 million of them are largely disconnected from education and career pathways—a population sometimes referred to as opportunity youth.<sup>1</sup> These young people are facing an education and career landscape that is increasingly challenging: Youth and young adult unemployment and underemployment are rising, and there are more than 1 million postsecondary education and training programs that lead to degrees, certifications or other credentials—meaning young people who want to acquire new skills or expertise must navigate an extraordinarily complex set of choices.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

Over the course of several months in 2025, the ASA Center for Career Navigation at Jobs for the Future (JFF) and the National League of Cities (NLC) Re-Engagement Network came together to explore how youth reengagement centers across the country were using digital tools in the career navigation services they offer disconnected young people. Our research included a conversation with a 10-person focus group made up of employees of five reengagement centers: Elevate 361 in Corpus Christi, Texas; Breakthrough 915 in El Paso, Texas; The Portland Public Schools Reconnection Center in Portland, Oregon; The DC Reconnection Center (DC REC) in Washington, DC; and Buffalo Futures in Buffalo, New York.

This brief highlights promising practices youth reengagement centers have adopted as they pilot, implement, and scale tech-enabled, people-centered strategies for engaging disconnected youth and supporting them as they make decisions on their education and career journeys. It also calls attention to the additional work that will be needed to more fully understand the outcomes, impact, and potential of these practices to improve the lives of young people.



#### LEARN MORE

To learn more about the reengagement centers whose staff assisted us with this research project, visit their websites:

→ [Elevate 361](#)

→ [Breakthrough 915](#)

→ [Portland Public Schools Reconnection Center](#)

→ [Buffalo Futures](#)

→ [DC REC](#)







# Tech-Enabled, People-Centered Approaches

Reengagement centers and other youth-serving organizations are increasingly adopting tech-enabled, people-centered approaches to providing career navigation services for young people. We define tech-enabled, people-centered approaches as those in which career navigation professionals meet regularly with young people to provide personal advice and guidance but intentionally use one or more tech tools to enhance the services they offer. These tech-enabled tools may include apps and platforms that are specifically designed to support career navigation (websites or other digital tools that are designed to help young people assess their interests or explore specific careers, for example), as well as more general-purpose systems (such as social media channels) that can play multiple roles in career exploration activities.



## DEFINITION

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# Promising Practices

Our focus group conversation revealed a number of practices that strengthen tech-enabled, people-centered approaches to providing career navigation services to young people who are disconnected from work and learning. In the following sections, we explore four that are especially promising.

## 1 Use digital tools to engage young people at the ‘moment of motivation.’

Disconnected young people often face multiple barriers that contribute to their disengagement from education and work. For example, they may be experiencing housing insecurity or living in unstable home environments. They may need treatment for physical and mental health conditions. They may have dependent care responsibilities, and they often lack access to reliable transportation. Young people in this population may often have “moments of motivation” when they’re interested in connecting with service providers and taking steps toward education and work but then find themselves unable to act on those feelings because they face an immediate need to address one or more of their challenges.

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Youth reengagement centers may succeed in connecting with young people in those circumstances by using social media outreach tools (including platforms such as Instagram and TikTok) as “digital doors” that young people can walk through at any time, whenever the moment of motivation strikes. The staff members in our focus group said this could be as simple as making young people aware that they can send a direct message via social media to a youth services program at any time, day or night. When reengagement centers have outreach strategies that support this type of instant, low-barrier connection on a platform that young people are already comfortable with, young people feel empowered to take action in a way that they might not if their options were limited to more traditional options such as calling a phone number to set up an appointment or making an appointment through a traditional website.

## Tips for Getting This Practice Right

- Use outreach content that is youth-friendly and encourages young people to initiate a connection.
- Monitor the platforms and accounts you're using regularly and set an organizational goal of responding in a timely manner, typically within one business day if possible.
- Quickly transition from digital connections to interpersonal engagement. For example, when you receive inquiries, assign staff members to visit young people at home or invite the young person to come in for an initial meeting (and provide transportation support if needed).
- Offer clear explanations of how young people can have ongoing communication with staff in the future. For example, let them know whether they can continue to contact their career navigators via social media or if they'll be required to switch to other forms of communication (such as text messages or phone calls).



### PROGAM SPOTLIGHT

#### Buffalo Futures

Buffalo Futures has implemented several “digital front door” practices that use popular social media channels to reach young people and allow them to send questions and requests for support using familiar tools such as the direct messaging apps embedded in these platforms.





## 2 Use digital tools for assessments of interests and skills, but make sure people are involved to keep the conversation grounded in reality.

Staffers at nearly all of the youth reengagement centers participating in this research reported that they used some type of app or web-based tool to help young people assess their skills and interests. These activities often happen early in the service delivery process, but in many cases young people aren't ready to advance into specific education or career pathways right away. Reengagement center staffers said many new clients need to spend several months stabilizing their lives and addressing basic needs before they're ready to take a step like enrolling in six-month training program. During that period, staff focus on helping them do things like get identification documents, enroll in public benefits programs, find housing, or access health care.

A key best practice here is for career navigation professionals to nurture a sense of enthusiasm, interest, and agency within a young person while also keeping the conversation grounded. For example, a digital tool that assesses interests and aligns those interests to occupations might suggest that a particular individual could be well-suited to a culinary career. A career navigator could provide support and encouragement around that as a long-term goal and identify some next steps that support exploration of this career field. But at the same time, the adult should make sure the young person is focused on immediate priorities, like applying for a housing voucher.

Career navigation professionals can also provide guidance and feedback that can help young people understand the realities of the labor market and perhaps temper their expectations. For example, if a young person with a record of arrests and incarceration has skills and interests that point to a career in health care, it might be necessary to have a conversation with that individual and point out that working in a highly regulated industry like health care may not be a realistic option because some laws prohibit people with certain convictions from working in certain facilities and most employers require job applicants to go through criminal background checks.



## Tips for Getting This Practice Right

- Choose digital tools that are youth-friendly and designed to assess interests and skills in a manner that works for young people. Look for apps and websites with intuitive, user-friendly interfaces, and make sure the assessment tools use language and examples that are relevant for a young adult population.
- Talk with young clients both before and after using these tools. Think of the tools as prompts for rich interpersonal conversations; they can support decisions about specific activities and action steps within the young person's personal plan, but interpersonal connections remain critical to setting a young person on a path to success. For example, let them know whether they can continue to contact their career navigators via social media or if they'll be required to switch to other forms of communication (such as text messages or phone calls).



### PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

#### DC REC

Staffers at DC REC in Washington told us that they've had success with an approach to career navigation that's truly tech-enabled and people-centered. They use digital interest and career assessment tools to help young people identify possible career paths but continue to lean heavily into one-on-one counseling and coaching conversations. The conversations not only provide an opportunity to offer more personalized guidance and advice; they also help young people develop the interpersonal skills and social and emotional resilience they need to successfully take action and achieve their goals as they pursue career paths that digital tools help them identify.



### 3 Enrich career exploration opportunities.

Research has consistently shown that young people rely heavily on family and friends to get ideas about possible careers, and for advice about pursuing education and career pathways.<sup>5</sup>

However, disconnected youth may not have those opportunities because they often come from family and community environments with significant, often intergenerational poverty and limited exposure to the career pathways that lead to quality jobs and opportunities for economic advancement. Therefore, one of the most important roles a career navigation professional can play in their lives is to broaden their horizons and help them learn about and explore the full landscape of career opportunities. Technology is a powerful tool that can enrich and expand these career exploration activities.

At the most basic level, reengagement center staff reported using digital platforms and tools to introduce young people to a wide range of career pathways, including industries and professions they might not be familiar with. To provide more in-depth understandings of occupations, youth-serving organizations can use resources like “day in the life” videos that provide first-person looks at what people actually do in specific occupations. They can also use augmented reality systems that take the “day in the life” experience a step further and allow users to (virtually) step into simulated workplaces and engage in highly interactive exploratory experiences.

Skilled career navigation professionals can build on these exploratory experiences by talking with young people to discuss their observations, reflections, and ideas for their own education and career journeys.

Like interest and skill assessment tools, the more advanced tech-enabled career exploration tools can spark conversations, and skilled career navigation professionals can build on these exploratory experiences by talking with young people to discuss their observations, reflections, and ideas for their own education and career journeys.

## Tips for Getting This Practice Right

- The quality of video-based career exploration resources varies widely, from self-produced videos posted on social media platforms to professional-grade videos that companies, trade organizations, workforce development boards, or other entities produce to raise awareness of specific careers and industries. Review what options are available in your region and make an effort to use the most realistic and highest-quality video-based content you can find.



- While they can offer especially engaging workplace exploration experiences, immersive virtual reality systems are expensive and you may need sophisticated IT resources to implement them. As an alternative to investing in that technology, look for local business and industry events where attendees may be able to participate in immersive virtual reality experiences free of charge. The organizations that run those types of events may also offer in-person career exploration activities such as career talks or tours of employers' facilities.
- Recognize that many young people may already be watching social media videos about careers and occupations on their own. This activity doesn't replace the services you offer; you can use it as a conversation starter. Ask young people if they're exploring jobs on social media, then discuss their thoughts about what they've learned. You could also watch some of these videos together and have a conversation afterward. The goal is to help them build the skills necessary to make well-informed, realistic education and career choices.

## 4 Provide young people with hands-on support while they use digital tools.

Many of the youth reengagement program staff members said they use digital learning and skill-building tools that are designed to support progress toward key milestones in the career navigation journey (earning a high school equivalency credential or developing specific durable skills, for example).

These tools can be an asset in program delivery for several reasons: They allow young people to learn at their own pace, they can support more personalized learning that aligns with the needs of the individual, and they may be cost-effective options that make sense for resource-constrained organizations.

However, disconnected youth may not be able to use these tools because they lack access to internet service or laptops and other tech devices and they may have limited digital literacy. Under those circumstances they may, for example, choose not to pursue a web-based class that requires learners to register and complete a profile online in a process that includes signing up with an email address or confirming their identity using an identity verification system.

To help clients overcome challenges like those, reengagement programs can adopt “side-by-side” approaches to these activities—where a career navigator literally sits beside a young person who's using a digital tool. The staff members we spoke to said they bring young people to community locations to use these types of platforms and applications so that a career navigation professional is available to offer real-time assistance and encouragement. As a bonus, this approach helps career navigators become familiar with the instructional content in these tools, enabling them to integrate discussions of these concepts and skills into their ongoing interactions with clients.

## Tips for Getting This Practice Right

- Provide access to the digital devices that people need to use skill-building tools because not all of them can be used on smartphones and disconnected young people may not have phone plans that support online connectivity.
- Lean into providing clients with one-on-one support right away—during the initial registration process and while they're engaging in early activities. As young people become more confident using technology, career navigators can create an atmosphere that fosters greater independence for the learner.
- Consider recruiting volunteers, including peers or near-peers of the young people you work with, to create a support network that can help create an environment of learning and success for your clients.



### PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

## Breakthrough 915

Employees at Breakthrough 915 in El Paso, Texas, said they regularly work with young people who have limited access to digital services and devices. These individuals need hands-on support to successfully use—and benefit from—web-based skill and interest assessment tools, skill-building applications and platforms, and other tech-based resources. The staffers said Breakthrough 915 invites these young people to visit its community-based center, where staff can provide in-person guidance and real-time support in accessing and using tech tools.



# Looking Ahead

The landscape of tech-enabled, people-centered career navigation work with disconnected young people is dynamic and rapidly changing. Our conversations with employees of youth reengagement centers revealed that this is a time of experimentation, innovation, and, in so many ways, trial and error. As stakeholders in this community, the ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF and the NLC are excited about this evolving area of practice and are keen to see a future learning agenda that helps us further understand key questions such as these:

What steps can we take to verify the effectiveness of tech-enabled approaches?	What training and support do career navigators working with this population need in order to implement these approaches in a high-quality manner?
How do we continue to identify innovative emerging practices and promote them so that they are integrated into practice, research, and policy conversations at a time of rapid technological change?	Are there specific tech-enabled tools that aren't currently available or easily accessible that could support more effective tech-enabled, people-centered approaches with this population?
What tech-enabled, people-centered practices are driving measurable improvement in education and career outcomes among disconnected youth?	What policies might support the broader adoption of effective tech-enabled, people-centered strategies to support America's 5 million disconnected youth?
How might we replicate and scale the tech-enabled, people-centered practices that are working well?	What aspects of tech-enabled, people-centered practices that are working well with disconnected youth could be used in services for broader youth and young adult populations?

Finally, this collaboration between the ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF and the NLC highlighted the need for increased professional development opportunities for frontline career navigation practitioners. Specifically, employees of youth-serving organizations would benefit from learning more about the continuum of tech-enabled tools that can support their work. With that knowledge, they'd be better able to integrate these tools into their work in a manner that increases the quality of services, enables organizations to expand their reach, and most important, improves education and career outcomes for young people who currently face multiple challenges.



# Endnotes

- 1 The Annie E. Casey Foundation, “A National Profile of Youth and Young Adults,” October 3, 2024, Casey Connects, <https://www.aecf.org/blog/a-national-profile-of-youth-and-young-adults#:~:text=Demographics,adults%20ages%2018%20to%2024>; Kristen Lewis and Alex Powers, *Broad Recovery, Persistent Inequity: Youth Disconnection in America*, The Measure of America Youth Disconnection Series 2024, October 31, 2024, <https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/BroadRecoveryPersistentInequity.pdf>.
- 2 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Unemployment Rate for Youth Ages 16 to 24 was 10.8 Percent in July 2025,” TED: The Economics Daily, August 27, 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2025/unemployment-rate-for-youth-ages-16-to-24-was-10-8-percent-in-july-2025.htm>.
- 3 Credential Engine, “Credential Confusion: New Report Identifies More than One Million Credentials Offered in the U.S. Across a Maze of Nearly 60,000 Providers,” December 7, 2022, <https://credentialengine.org/2022/12/07/credential-confusion-new-report-identifies-more-than-one-million-credentials-offered-in-the-u-s-across-a-maze-of-nearly-60000-providers/>.
- 4 Julie Ray, “Gen Z, Parents Lack Knowledge of Post-High School Options,” Gallup Inc., June 9, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/691418/gen-parents-lack-knowledge-post-high-school-options.aspx>; The Schultz Family Foundation and HarrisX, “The Broken Marketplace: America’s School-to-Work Crisis,” n.d., <https://www.brokenmarketplace.org>.
- 5 Joseph B. Fuller, et al., *Navigating Opportunity: Career Information and Mobility in Low-Wage Employment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Project on Workforce, Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government, Harvard Kennedy School, April 16, 2025), <https://www.pw.hks.harvard.edu/post/navigating-opportunity-career-information-and-mobility-in-low-wage-employment>; Gallup, Walton Family Foundation, and Jobs for the Future, *Walton Family Foundation Voices of Gen Z Study*, “Known Unknowns: Gen Z’s Limited Awareness of Non-College Pathways,” 2025, <https://static.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/a0/27/c25fc5874aee9a786d166ecb3343/walton-jff-genz-final-report-06062025.pdf>.

