

Narrative Change Goals



CareerWise Colorado's mission is to create opportunities for students and employers through modern youth apprenticeship programs, integrated into K-12 and higher-education systems, so that any student can find a path to economic prosperity. Through the Pathways Narrative Project, CareerWise set a goal to expand the number of CareerWise youth apprenticeship opportunities offered in Colorado by

increasing tech employer adoption and championing employer success. CareerWise sought to support tech employers to see work-based learning, like apprenticeships, as benefiting both businesses and students, and that partnerships with organizations like CareerWise could lead to strong business and social impacts.

Mapping the Narrative Landscape



First, CareerWise Colorado did a messaging audit of tech companies of varying sizes with a Colorado presence, to test their hypothesis that businesses viewed youth apprenticeships primarily as philanthropic investments, not as beneficial for business and society. The audit confirmed their hypothesis and added specificity to their narrative

inquiry. They observed that apprenticeships were framed in ways that made them feel distinct from other hiring practices and processes, including internships, and that messages describing youth employment programs often centered on innovation, diversity, and equity/equality.

Understanding Audience Mindset



Next, CareerWise conducted in-depth interviews with leaders from the tech industry who worked in roles related to diversity, equity, and inclusion; human resources; and operations. They learned that their audience had vastly different understandings of "apprenticeship" and its value, often equating apprenticeships with the acquisition of hard skills and labor, and not with critical thinking or the opportunity

to build professional relationships. Despite struggling to understand all of the aspects of apprenticeship, audiences believed that the current systems for recruitment of new talent did not reach everyone that they should and they were supportive of a program that would help more young people gain entry to what they believed to be a selective and exclusive sector.



Testing Persuasive Messages



CareerWise conducted a survey and in-depth interviews to test sample messages with C-suite and HR leaders in tech companies with a presence in Colorado. They wanted to learn how their definition of apprenticeship aligned with tech leaders, and also how best to message employer and student experiences of apprenticeship in ways that build support for their apprenticeships as a viable option for early-career hiring. They tested a fictional case study, their own pitch deck, and a short video in which a student describes her experience as an apprentice. In addition they developed and tested a definition of apprenticeship with the goal of balancing the benefit of apprenticeships to young people and adults and also elevating the ways that apprenticeship helps to solve for talent and recruitment challenges that companies may already be experiencing.

Refined definition of apprenticeship:

Apprenticeships are one part of a sustainable early talent pipeline and combine academic coursework with real world learning so that young people gain meaningful work experience, grow their networks, and can gain entry to the professional sector.

Apprenticeships expand young people's horizons and career options and make education more impactful for the learner and the employer. Young people who complete apprenticeships begin their professional lives with a foot in the door, and a way to set themselves apart. Through apprenticeships, businesses can cultivate talent in the communities in which they operate, foster loyalty among future employees, and increase the diversity of their workforce.

CareerWise learned that effective messaging:

- Acknowledges the unequal nature of the tech sector and how existing relationships unfairly advantage some candidates over others
- Helps audiences to see themselves as good people who care about young people in their communities, and shows in emotional terms, the benefit to the apprentice, the employer, and the bottom line
- Frames apprenticeships as an experience in which young people have agency – in other words, an experience in which young people evaluate and make decisions for themselves, not as an experience that is given to them by an adult
- Shows how apprenticeships mirror experiences of some tech professionals by providing a hands-on learning experience that immediately pays off in a job and money

Every opportunity I've had to move to a different organization was rooted in relationships, right? I've never gone out and put a resume out there and gone to a job board. So that's my personal experience. I also think that outside my personal experience, that's true. Many times when I hire folks they come through relationships I already have, right?

—Tech Employer

I can see like there's a lot of eagerness about like, joining the tech industry, trying to understand what it is. And it can be very confusing. I have noticed that there is a huge disparity among people who just don't have the resources...like some people, maybe their parents are not engineers or executives at a large company, so they don't understand how these things work. There's a lot of talent out there. And from an employee/employer standpoint, it's worth investing in, to level the playing field.

—Tech Employer

[Apprenticeships] give you an, an early look on an individual. And it works both ways, right? [Young people] get to see the organization, they get to learn more about the organization. They get to learn more about how real businesses operate before they're hired into a permanent professional position. It certainly provides a window into corporate culture that they wouldn't get otherwise by just sitting in a classroom.

—Tech Employer



What's Next for CareerWise Colorado



The survey and interviews provided CareerWise Colorado with several pieces of content to test in its communications. CareerWise will refine and test messaging by conducting a message audit of existing materials; developing a new “problem statement” to describe the opportunities and challenges the organization is seeking to address; connecting apprenticeships to their audiences’ beliefs, values, emotions, and identities and sharing insights with the CareerWise network and the broader field.



My thought process is that yes, we need to have narrative change to change the big-picture system goals. We have smaller goals around the numbers of apprenticeships and things like that. And I can see narrative shifts in our audiences, like with parents and what they believe about college. But I think that narrative change really impacts the system side of things, which is what we think of when we think of our big-picture goals.

—Jason Jansky

Director of Marketing and Communications, CareerWise

About the Pathways Narrative Project

The Pathways Narrative Project is a two-year collaborative initiative, led by Wonder: Strategies for Good and supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation and others, that convened nine organizations working in five places (Colorado, Indiana, New York,

Texas, and Washington, DC) to improve education and career pathways for young people. Together the cohort explored how to leverage the power of narrative to advance programs and systems change in the pathways space.