

# Working Smarter: Driving Employment Empowerment with Career Literacy + Networks

2022 REPORT BY THE DEBRUCE FOUNDATION



## Acknowledgements

We at The DeBruce Foundation recognize the content of this nationally representative, longitudinal trend study is only possible due to a number of supporting parties and contributors.

The DeBruce Foundation appreciates **our board of directors** for continuing guidance and support toward the mission to expand pathways to economic growth and opportunity.

We thank **Argun Saatcioglu, Ph.D.** for designing the study and analyzing the data, in addition to **The DeBruce Foundation team** who provided insights and technical support throughout the project.

Special thanks to **Jessica Hembree of Platform Civic Strategies** for technical assistance, the more than **4,000 individuals who completed the “National Employment Security and Career Literacy” survey**, and to the **more than 40 professionals across the country who participated in focus groups** to give feedback on the project and findings prior to publication of this report. Your insights, questions, and enthusiasm provided fuel to the research and increased the transparency and authenticity of the project.

## Letter from Dr. Leigh Anne Taylor Knight

Do you know anyone going through a career transition? Trying to find their first job? Trying to decide what education to pursue for a career? Aspiring to return to the workforce? Feeling stuck and unsure how to move? If so, this report is for you.



The DeBruce Foundation is a national foundation whose mission is to expand pathways to economic growth and opportunity. Like you, our team sees the complexities of navigating career transitions, especially those that come at pivotal times in life related to changes in education, family, or the economy.

Employment empowerment involves the ability to enhance one's appeal in the broader career market; improve one's working conditions, income, and benefits; reduce the risk of unemployment; and build wealth. Our nationally representative study presented here found employment empowerment is strongly correlated with career literacy and network strength. It reinforces the insight that employment empowerment is a complex and vital individual and societal asset to cultivate. As a result, The DeBruce Foundation will:

- Pursue more diligently our commitment to build career literacy and network strength of individuals
- Continue research on effective practices that support employment empowerment

We are inspired daily by you who commit to advance people who are launching into their careers and those who are going through career transitions. I hope the findings of this, and future reports will enable us to have greater impact with more individuals together.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leigh Anne Taylor Knight".

Dr. Leigh Anne Taylor Knight, *Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer*

P.S. Stay current on our work building career literacy and partnering with entities to strengthen networks: [sign up for the newsletter](#) or feel free to start a dialogue with us at [info@debruce.org](mailto:info@debruce.org).

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## Executive Summary

The DeBruce Foundation commissioned a longitudinal trend survey of 4,000 adults in Fall 2021 to learn more about contributors to employment empowerment in the United States. These contributors will continue to be measured in the American economy semiannually. This first release of the study's findings indicates the need for intentional actions to build the career literacy and networks of individuals in order to unlock economic opportunities.

### The finding: Employment empowerment is related to career literacy and a strong network

Employment empowerment involves the ability to: (1) influence one's working conditions such as schedule, income, opportunities for learning and growth; (2) reduce the risk of employment vulnerability and enhance one's appeal in the broader labor market; (3) gain and maintain access to high quality benefits including healthcare coverage and paid time off; and (4) build wealth through savings and retirement investments.

People with a high degree of employment empowerment earn more, have shorter spells of unemployment, and operate with a wider view of opportunity.

**55%**

More in annual average  
salary

**26%**

More are currently  
employed

**17%**

More jobs considered  
outside current career  
path

Participants with a high degree of employment empowerment also exhibit a high degree of **career literacy** and are situated within **strong networks**, relative to those with both low career literacy and weak networks.

### The problem: 7 of 10 Americans are low in one or both, with 4 of 10 low in both career literacy and network strength

This means many Americans are at considerable risk of unemployment, lower wages, fewer benefits, less autonomy over work conditions, and less savings for emergency and long-term needs.

## Call to action: Build employment empowerment

Working smarter entails people building skills to make informed career decisions. This will make a difference for individuals as they launch careers and navigate transitions across a lifetime. **Increasing career literacy and network strength accelerates one's path to employment empowerment.**

Individuals can raise their career literacy and network strength. **How can we work smarter together to intentionally develop individuals' career literacy and network strength to accelerate employment empowerment?**

### The DeBruce Foundation will continue to:

- Develop and deploy career literacy tools and processes to improve informed career decision making;
- Partner with entities effectively building network strength of individuals; and
- Measure practices to build career literacy, network strength, and employment empowerment.

### Work smarter with us by:

- Accessing career literacy resources, such as the [Agile Work Profiler](#), [Career Exploration Tools](#), or [Agilities.org](#);
- Measuring career literacy, network strength, and employment empowerment; and
- Tracking trends of these in the coming years.

Empowering individuals to craft and effectively pursue career goals, alongside raising their confidence and network strength, is the objective. Equipping individuals with what it takes to launch careers and navigate career transitions across a lifetime is something we can do together. Working smarter, we can raise employment empowerment.



## Why study employment empowerment?

It starts at an early age when someone first asks a child, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Individuals begin contemplating what they will do to earn a living.

It continues across a lifetime as individuals go through a variety of transitions in life, such as at times of graduating or when their formal education journey ends. There are family changes such as relocating, having children, or assuming responsibilities to care for elders. There are changes in jobs due to better opportunities or unforeseen changes in work conditions, as well as changes affected by employer decisions about skills, technologies, and budgets in organizations, resulting in shifts for individuals. Evidence of systems historically impacting certain groups of people who have been marginalized to a higher degree makes it more of an imperative to study factors related to economic security and upward mobility.

As if that is not already daunting enough, the future of careers is full of unknowns. Our economy is developing rapidly with the workforce expected to be vastly different in a brief time. As stated by Michelle R. Wiese in *Long Life Learning*, technology and other advancements “will continue to give rise to entirely new kinds of jobs and careers, ones that we cannot even begin to name” (Wiese 2021). Therefore, the way we prepare for successful futures is not as much about picking a single path toward a specific job. It is more about people developing skills that will both set them up for the vast array of opportunities and prepare them to make informed career decisions across a lifetime of transitions.

**The way we prepare for successful futures is about people developing skills that will set them up for the vast array of opportunities and career decisions across a lifetime of transitions.**

That is why it is relevant to ask the question: *How should one be preparing to navigate inevitable career transitions across a lifetime?*

**To better prepare people to be well-informed career decision-makers, we need to know what separates those who are having success from those who struggle when navigating careers.**

To that end, this study asks: What contributes to a person’s economic security and upward mobility? These two elements—economic security and upward mobility—are at the core of our understanding of employment empowerment. **By empowerment, we mean the ability to craft and effectively pursue career goals and to develop the confidence to succeed.**

**Individuals with employment empowerment** have **higher income** with **better benefits**, and more **autonomy** over work conditions and schedule. They are positioned to accumulate **more savings** and display more willingness to explore a **greater variety of job opportunities**. They also experience a **lower unemployment risk**. Given these advantages, we believe

employment empowerment plays a key role in unlocking economic opportunity. The possible consequences for those lacking employment empowerment include being less prepared for work, unstable employment security, and a trajectory of lower-wage employment options.

**Employment  
empowerment  
unlocks economic  
opportunity.**

Improving an individual’s employment empowerment depends on multiple factors, some within one’s control and others less so. Increasingly, individuals recognize they cannot afford to wait for systems to change before they act on their future. **This study conveys two factors over which the individual can have a meaningful degree of control: career literacy and network strength.**

Career literacy and network strength can be readily addressed, because we can improve career literacy through educational efforts across the lifespan. Including attitudinal and behavioral change supports, while a person cultivates network strength, is important when increasing one’s agency. Practices and programs that foster social capital in the form of connections with people from diverse backgrounds and experiences are imperative. With these, we can raise employment empowerment for people from different walks of life.



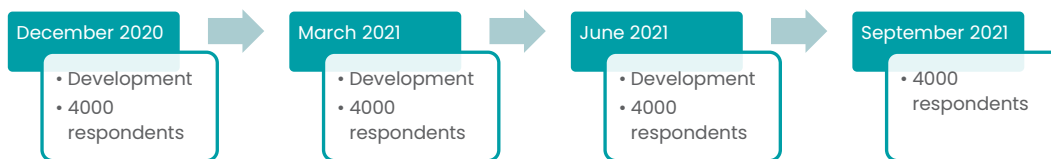
## Methodology and Analysis

In Fall 2020, The DeBruce Foundation initiated the “National Employment Security and Career Literacy” survey. This survey was designed to assess patterns of employment, income, and work conditions in America. Survey questions cover topics of employment experiences, career literacy, and professional and personal network resources. It also includes information on employment history, personal background, and demographics.

The analysis presented in this report draws on 4,000 responses from Fall 2021. Survey respondents are nationally representative in terms of income, years of education, gender, race, ethnicity, region, and employment status. The study employed sampling strategies as well as sample-weighting procedures to ensure representativeness in terms of income, education, race, ethnicity, and gender. The predictive analysis controlled for race, gender, and education level to isolate the impacts of career literacy and network strength on employment empowerment. Methods also involved procedures to account for self-report, self-selection, and other estimation biases.

### Survey development

The survey was piloted multiple times in 2020–21 for validation and refinement before being launched for this study in Fall 2021.

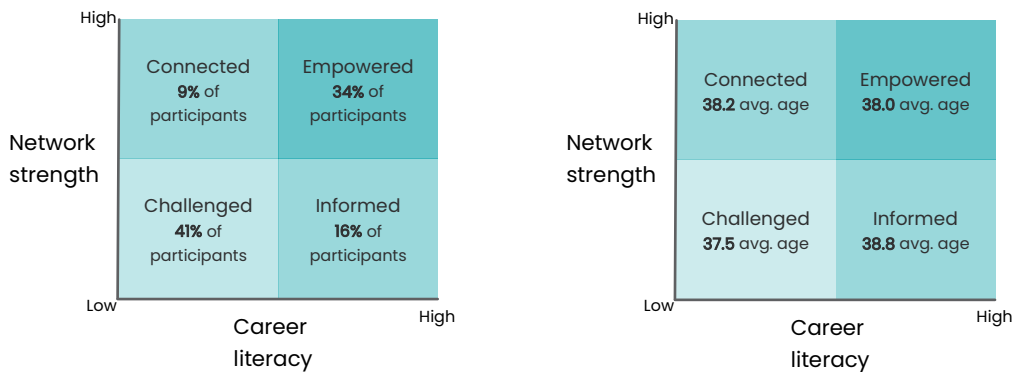


The DeBruce Foundation will continue the longitudinal trend surveying semiannually to track employment empowerment, career literacy, and network strength in the American workforce over time.

## Findings

For the purposes of this report, The DeBruce Foundation categorized survey respondents as fitting into one of four quadrants based on their career literacy and network strength.

The largest share of participants, **41% had both low network strength and low career literacy. This “challenged” group was low in both key characteristics needed to accelerate employment empowerment.** The “empowered” participants, 34% of the sample, represented individuals with both higher career literacy and higher network strength. The remaining two quadrants “connected” and “informed,” together comprised 25% of the sample. Across all four quadrants, the average age was 38 years old.



Study participants who exhibit **high career literacy and strong networks have more employment empowerment than those with lower career literacy and weaker networks.** “Empowered” respondents with high levels of both career literacy and network strength earn 55% more in annual salary and 26% more of them are currently employed. They also consider 17% more jobs outside their current career path.

**55%**

More in annual average salary

**26%**

More are currently employed

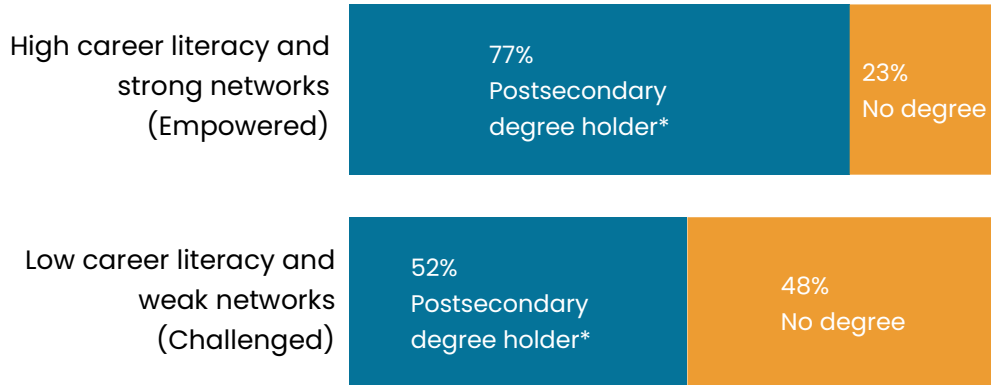
**17%**

More jobs considered outside current career path

In addition, “empowered” participants report having better benefits, more autonomy over work conditions and schedule, and an accumulation of more savings for emergency and long-term needs.

The following charts illustrate how the sample is distributed more specifically across the categories by education level, race, and gender.

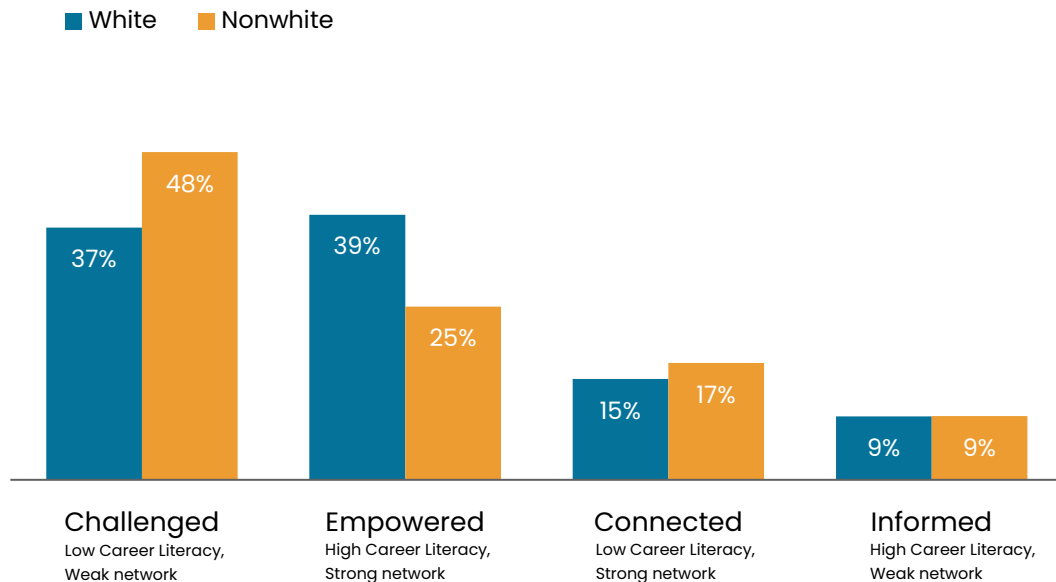
Education level varied widely between people “challenged” by low career literacy and weak networks in comparison to the “empowered” with high career literacy and strong networks. Respondents “empowered” with high career literacy and strong networks had higher education levels.



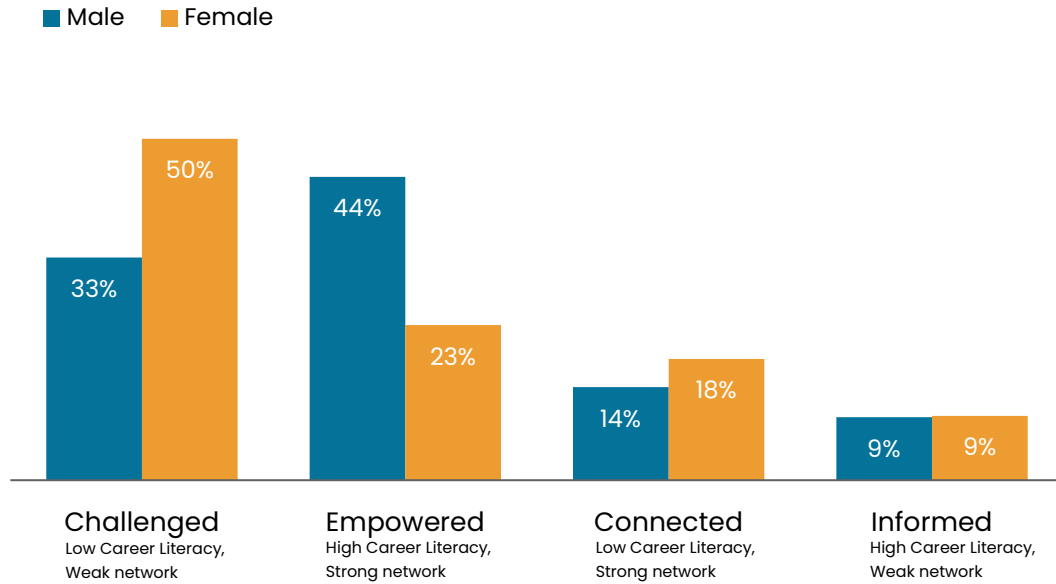
\*This term includes Doctorate degrees, Professional degrees, Master’s degrees, Bachelor’s degrees, Associate’s degrees, and Technical/Vocational degrees.

Three out of every five panel respondents were **white** and two were **nonwhite**\*\* . In terms of career literacy and network strength of participants based on race, findings indicate nonwhite respondents are likely to have lower career literacy and weaker networks than their white counterparts.

\*\*Includes American Indian, Asian (including Pacific-Islanders and Hawaiian), Black, Latinx, and others.



The gender percentages among respondents were evenly split: 50.4% **male** and 49.6% **female**. More females present as “challenged” due to having lower career literacy and weaker networks than males.



Examining the sample distribution by demographics, there is evidence of career literacy and network strength varying in ways that could be attributed to systemic causes. Recognizing that employment empowerment varies across groups along lines of traits such as gender, race, economic background, education level, and age increases the urgency and seriousness of acting on what is found in this study.

**Recognizing that employment empowerment varies across diverse groups of people increases the urgency and seriousness of acting on what is found in this study.**

The findings indicate that having both a high degree of career literacy and a strong network increases one’s employment empowerment.

## Career Literacy Helps Individuals Navigate Dynamic Pathways

Career literacy, as defined by The DeBruce Foundation for this survey, includes a **vision** for one's career, **self-awareness** of one's skills and interests, **capacity to communicate** one's professional value, robust job **search skills**, and **capability to explore** multiple career pathways.

The employment landscape is constantly changing. Career literacy helps individuals navigate this landscape. Those with high career literacy are better able to adapt and position themselves for success.

### Who needs career literacy? People of all ages.

Early career decisions occur with high school students when they begin thinking about their post-secondary plans. Which immediate path will one choose? Higher education, employment by apprenticeship or otherwise, enlistment in the armed forces, entrepreneurship, or something else? When it comes specifically to employment, 67% of youth (ages 16-24 years old), consider two or fewer careers (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner 2021). Many young individuals have little clarity about the next steps to take after high school.

Example: Julieta is a high school junior living in a rural community. She is disconnected from work and school opportunities. She lives with her grandmother, her mom is incarcerated, and the family struggles financially. She likes watching skincare tutorials on YouTube and would love to be an influencer. She is the person in her friend group who keeps things organized and can persuade others to join her point of view. Julieta is getting close to graduation but doesn't exactly know what her options are or what to do next. What is a potential job that would be a good starting point for her to build on her interests and skills? How can she get on a path to prepare and get experience?

In addition, even after making a choice, many people question the option chosen. Unforeseen circumstances, changes in personal situations, or the realization that better options may exist out there can motivate one to revisit existing plans.

Example: Jordan is an incoming first-year student at college. He is starting out as a sociology major but is unsure about the classes he is taking and his choice of a major. Jordan is feeling overwhelmed living away from home for the first time and is having a tough time staying on top of his studies. Given the excessive cost of being a college student, he is feeling stressed not knowing if he is in the right major or what types of jobs he can get when he graduates. What could be his next step to make informed decisions about his major and more specific career goals?

The COVID-19 pandemic reinforces the importance of career literacy, especially across the adult population. The pandemic resulted in layoffs in various sectors, along with staffing shortages and fluctuating unemployment rates. It also accelerated changes in the traditional routine of work and employment. All of these make it ever more important to be well-equipped for transitions.

**The COVID-19  
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Example: At 42, Bella is feeling discouraged. After five years, she was laid off from a data processing job that she really enjoyed at a company that provided health insurance. She is collecting unemployment but has no insurance. After looking for six months, she is having a tough time finding similar work and is starting to panic. As a single mom, she needs to find a new job to keep the bills paid. She is unsure what to do. Should she keep looking for data processing or change her career?

These three examples are emblematic of many others where the individual can benefit from career literacy. Changing the way in which we prepare people to enter and re-enter the economy requires strategies for educating across the lifespan. The good news is that there are tools and programs to boost the career literacy of individuals in every age bracket. Engaging to find what is most effective is imperative, especially in the context of the changing economy. But in addition to career literacy, one also needs network strength, which is what we turn to next.



## Networks Matter

Individuals with a strong network have **multiple connections** spanning a diversity of **industries, education levels,** and social **backgrounds.**

Network strength is a function of the diversity and supportiveness of an individual's professional and personal networks.

Strong networks support employment empowerment by helping individuals build awareness of varied career pathways, connect to job opportunities, and traverse the broader economic landscape.

**Network strength is a function of the diversity and supportiveness of an individual's professional and personal networks.**

### **Who needs network strength? People wanting to accelerate their pathways to employment empowerment.**

You've gotten the call or text: a friend's child or spouse is making a career transition. Do you know of anyone who is hiring? Can you make a few introductions? Are you willing to do an informational interview? Sometimes the transition is a personal choice, and it may even be at a time of celebration, such as graduation from school or a credentialing program.

Example: Maverick is a first-generation student from an immigrant family. He graduated from college last May with a degree in political science and completed a summer virtual internship. Exuding optimism for his future, he lived at home and worked during college to pay for school. He has applied for entry level jobs through LinkedIn, but he never makes the final cut. Maverick is working as a barista but wonders if he can even get a job with his degree or if he belongs in politics. He is feeling pressure from his family to get a better paying job soon to start paying back student loans. A real gap for him is that he does not know anyone who has a job like the one he wants. No one in his family has good connections for what he needs. He feels behind in terms of his network to find a job. How can Maverick leverage his college experience, internship, and current job to connect with people in his desired career field?

Expanding one's professional network is critical in launching a fruitful career. For those already in a career pathway, the transition may occur amidst stressors of health, family life, poor work situations, industry changes, or relocations. According to Pew Research Center, recent college graduates are more likely than graduates overall to be underemployed. In addition to working jobs that typically do not require a college degree, only "34% of underemployed graduates ages 22 to 27 worked what the Fed defines as 'good non-college jobs' – those paying at least \$45,000 a year – down from around half in the 1990's" (Schaeffer 2022).

Example: Jess currently works as a ride hailing driver, taking people to and from the airport, medical appointments, and any place they need to go. She never thought this was what she would be doing when she graduated from college three years ago with a degree in chemistry. After having landed a great lab job at a local company, she began experiencing some health problems. The result was her not being able to keep the job. Now, she is determined to help her other siblings get through college. She is so determined to help financially that she works too many hours with rarely any time left to go on her own "next job" search. One would think that every day with so many people from different walks of life getting in and out of her car, personable and well-educated Jess would meet someone who would know of a good job opportunity for her. That has not yet happened, so she has enrolled in a credentialing program to increase her specific technical skills in hopes that she can re-enter the workforce in a field she enjoys. How can Jess make the most of her everyday relationships to help her find a job aligned with her educational level?

These two examples symbolize many others where the individual can gain from more diverse and deeper networks.

Consider the above examples of Julieta, Jordan, Bella, Maverick, and Jess. They and the millions of Americans they represent could greatly benefit from increased career literacy and stronger networks to build employment empowerment. There is great promise in existing initiatives that are striving to increase components of career literacy and network strength at the same time.

## Efforts to Grow Employment Empowerment: Programs that Drive Career Literacy + Networks

Across lifespans and communities, individuals with formalized access to programs that commit to building career literacy and network strength simultaneously can accelerate their paths to employment empowerment. The upcoming sections highlight programs and initiatives driving career literacy and network strength at different ages.

**Programs and initiatives are driving career literacy and network strength at all ages.**

### Youth Jumpstarting

Youth organizations have long recognized the importance of skill building and mentors. As examples outside of school time, 4-H, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Junior Achievement, and Youth Volunteer Corps have been building life and work skills of participating youth while expanding their networks. Extracurricular and co-curricular programs in schools such as sports, band, choir, and forensics, as well as career-focused organizations like the National FFA Organization; Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA); and Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) have been fostering leadership and building the connections of young people. With each of these types of programs being committed to jumpstarting youth for careers, they should continue to be leveraged as communities adopt additional initiatives to expand career pathways.

The last two decades have been witness to schools across the nation adopting strategies to ensure more students have access to experiences that will build career exploration and readiness. Such efforts often engage students in solving work-based scenarios in both simulated environments, as well as direct connections to employers. Approaches like Center for Advanced Professional Studies and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning increase young people's understanding of their own strengths, skills, and visions for future careers. Students are also getting networked to a variety of companies and professionals at an early age.

[Project Lead The Way](#) and [FIRST Robotics](#) are known to be strong programs across the country in terms of increasing interest in STEM-related fields of study while advancing the technical skills students need in order to be successful in careers. They also build in the involvement of expert professionals to inform and enhance student experiences. [KC STEM Alliance](#), in partnership with KC metro school districts and businesses, count more than 90,000 youth as engaged with programming. With teachers and coaches, the KC STEM Alliance team has intentionally included components of career literacy and network strength building. They are measuring for changes across students' experiences with programs and being intentional with using such an approach to close the gaps for students who are underrepresented in STEM majors and careers.

[Real World Learning](#) founded by KC metro school districts and [The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation](#) has been acknowledged by [Tom Vander Ark of Getting Smart](#) as "...the largest and most important effort in America to make high school experiences more valuable" (Vander Ark 2021). This well-designed initiative incorporates the educational components needed to build career literacy and network strength with high school students. More than 75 high schools of the 100 in the six-county region are encouraging community-connected projects at scale.

[ProX](#), a collaborative effort of community stakeholders, provides connections for students to professional experiences that prepare them for whatever comes after high school. Guaranteeing an educational and professional experience for students who commit 25 hours per week for a stipend, the program coordinates application, placement, and payment while ensuring quality experiences for employers and students. Coaches guide the career literacy and mentoring experiences with an eye toward this being some of the very first experiences youth will have to develop realistic visions through exposure to companies and careers that they likely have not ever seen before.

## Young Adults Launching

Landing one's first full-time employment requires job search skills along with the confidence and willingness to explore options, not to mention the ability to convince someone to hire. The capacity to communicate one's value in the career marketplace starts with knowing one's strengths and interests in relationship to careers.

Essential is knowing what steps to take to prepare for the job one wants. Needing to build career literacy and networks does not end at high school graduation, rather, the need increases as people determine the next steps. Post-secondary institutions; government agencies such as the military and workforce centers; and employers and professional organizations are vital to steering young adults.

The [University of Missouri-Kansas City](#) has demonstrated a commitment to intentional initiatives intended to engage with students early in their career exploration journey. For example, UMKC's [Summer Bridge Scholars](#), [Trustees' Scholars](#), and [Professional Career Escalators](#) connect students to career and academic guidance. By giving access to alumni and other community members, these programs are committed to providing opportunities to learn about career options while discovering one's unique value proposition and attaining a degree.

"Never go in. Never go back." With this mantra, [SWAGG INC.](#) recognizes the importance of "prevention, pre-entry, and re-entry services to put a person's potential first and prison last." [Founder Na'im Al-Amin](#) strives to provide for others what he wishes he would have had; preparing people with knowing their interests, connecting them to careers, and providing the influence of mentors. "Ideally, even before they're released, they get to see the ways their interests and transferable skills fit into their career and the new future they're building. Together, through our mentorship and their ingenuity and skills, we get to create new outcomes" (Al-Amin 2021).

## Adults Changing Gears

Believing it is never too late to learn more about how one brings value into the career marketplace and knowing we can all develop our skills and networks, entities serving adults are important engines for raising the employment empowerment of individuals.

[Black Excellence KC](#) founder Craig Moore believes in building community among people from differing backgrounds and combining one-of-a-kind experiences with mentorship. Specifically seeking to serve Black professionals, this organization commits to affirming individuals with their strengths related to careers, sets up people with connections to grow their skills, and encourages career advancement alongside financial and wealth building.

Giving scholarships and support services for low- and modest-income adults needing access to pursue and complete a post-secondary credential or degree, [KC Scholars](#) provides opportunities for adult learners. In addition to increasing awareness of high demand, high wage opportunities and the path to preparing for those, the organization opens doors to professionals and assets to increase informed career decision-making.

[RUNG for Women](#) takes a holistic approach by offering professional and personal development opportunities within a supportive community in St. Louis. Women members, desiring to earn more money and elevate their lives, have access to co-located and coordinated resources intended to build career skills that will increase earnings. Concurrently, members establish new and diverse networks through the community of partners engaged with this effort.



## Communities Guiding

Organizations and governments can play key roles in launching models that raise the career literacy of individuals while intentionally constructing better networks for participants. The following examples demonstrate how these can happen across the lifespan.

Together, Kansas' Board of Regents and Department of Commerce have partnered with [Parker Dewey](#), colleges, and businesses to provide the [Kansas Micro-Internship program](#) for college students. The aim is to “connect businesses, job seekers, educational institutions, and training providers to ensure the state’s workforce is equipped to meet industry needs and to help create economic success for Kansas.” Providing a platform for experiential recruiting results in a win for the students who get to experience virtual, mini professional assignments that pay in both connections to professional networks and development of their skills.

The [Indiana Career Explorer](#) illustrates a statewide commitment to providing a platform to serve individuals across their lifetime as they seek and find their career paths. It makes tools available for K-12 students to begin exploring careers that will help inform their graduation plans; young adults looking for career and job search assistance, training certifications, and skill upgrades; and adults in the workforce looking to explore how their skills align with opportunities. This platform starts a systemic and systematic approach to developing career literacy. When effectively paired with the services in high schools, JAG offices, colleges, and workforce centers that will intentionally build the networks of participants, individuals can be empowered across their lifetime.

## Conclusion

Every person will find themselves in employment transitions during their professional career. Evidence shows that most people will change jobs nine to twelve times across a lifetime. Hence, being adequately prepared and positioned for working smarter to prepare for multiple pathways is critical.

**Hence, being adequately prepared and positioned for working smarter to prepare for multiple pathways is critical.**

These findings show that working smarter involves the need for an elevated level of employment empowerment—and for most people that will require structures and systems that support career literacy and network strength. The good news is that while much work is needed to improve the way people prepare for the changing economy, by working together with people across the lifespan we can increase pathways to economic growth and opportunity. There are numerous examples of organizations effectively working in this space.

Building career literacy can start with an awareness and affirmation of what one's strengths and interests are in relationship to the rich array of different jobs and career pathways in the economy. With self-confidence and an understanding of one's interests and passions, along with a robust knowledge of career opportunities, one can more effectively explore options across a variety of sectors and job titles. The individual can also be taught specific skills to communicate their value in terms of work activities in a job interview, on a resume, and in a social profile.

The results of this study indicate that while increasing one's career literacy is important, it is insufficient for individuals looking to move at their fastest pace to higher levels of employment empowerment. To accelerate one's gains in this regard, the preparation needs to include building one's network strength so that one has a diverse web of people who will reliably support and guide the individual through times of career and other life transitions.

**The good news is:**

- **Career literacy can be developed** through educational experiences; and
- **Network strength can be built** with opportunities to exchange social capital in structured initiatives.

It is never too early to begin to increase one's career literacy, as the compounding effect matters. Likewise, it is never too late to advance career literacy as adults. Educational efforts with people across their lifetimes are needed, to meet them where they are, as well as to keep up with the changing context of the career marketplace.

We can initiate and adopt practices and programs to foster the exchange of social capital across populations of people from different backgrounds and experiences. When people live marginalized in economically challenged communities, they do not have access to networks to be upwardly mobile. Building network strength can begin with youth programs and be an important component of initiatives serving adults of all ages.

**Working smarter is a requirement.** It starts with engaging people in approaches to advance career literacy. This includes a vision for one's career, self-awareness of one's skills and interests, the capacity to communicate one's professional value, strong job search skills, and the capability to explore multiple career pathways. Next, individuals need a network of multiple connections who are supportive and spread across diverse industries, education levels, and social backgrounds. **Pairing career literacy with network strength is the key to accelerating the employment empowerment of individuals.**

## Call to Action

Organizations across the country are working to build sustainable, equitable, and prosperous communities, with many focusing on how to close talent gaps. Individuals in our economy are the talent. Moving them from uninformed to informed career decision-makers honors them as people first, who also bring value to these efforts.

In this dynamic economy, knowing what separates those who are employment empowered from those who are challenged calls us to reframe how we prepare people to launch careers and navigate career transitions across their lifetimes.

Individuals can raise their career literacy and network strength. **How can we work smarter together to intentionally develop individuals' career literacy and network strength to accelerate employment empowerment?**

### The DeBruce Foundation will continue to:

- Develop and deploy career literacy tools and processes to improve informed career decision making;
- Partner with entities effectively building network strength of individuals; and
- Measure practices to build career literacy, network strength, and employment empowerment.

### Work smarter with us by:

- Accessing career literacy resources, such as the [Agile Work Profiler](#), [Career Exploration Tools](#), or [Agilities.org](#);
- Measuring career literacy, network strength, and employment empowerment; and
- Tracking trends of these in the coming years.

Empowering individuals to craft and effectively pursue career goals, alongside raising their confidence and network strength, is the objective. Equipping individuals with what it takes to launch careers and navigate career transitions across a lifetime is something we can do together. Working smarter, we can raise employment empowerment.

## About The DeBruce Foundation and This Study

The DeBruce Foundation is a national foundation whose mission is to expand pathways to economic growth and opportunity. The Foundation is committed to helping individuals unlock their potential and find career pathways. By developing solutions such as the Agile Work Profiler, we change how people pursue careers. By partnering strategically, we increase experiences and exposure to widen career opportunities, starting with youth and working across the lifespan. Learn more at [www.DeBruce.org](http://www.DeBruce.org).

The DeBruce Foundation is focused on building pathways to economic growth and opportunity. Employment empowerment is a precursor to economic opportunity. The goal of this research was to understand contributors to employment empowerment.

The DeBruce Foundation will continue to field the longitudinal trend survey twice a year to track employment empowerment, career literacy, and network strength in the American population over time.

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