

Spring 2026

Pivots Without Pathways:

Career Navigation in a Fragmented Labor Market

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Executive Summary

Career Navigation in an Evolving Labor Market

Economic mobility in the United States increasingly depends not just on skills or credentials, but on individuals' ability to navigate a fragmented and volatile labor market. Career trajectories are becoming less linear as workers change jobs more frequently and re-enter education at multiple points in their lives. At the same time, automation and generative AI are reshaping work, accelerating changes in job requirements and prompting more frequent, complex decisions under conditions of uncertainty. **Careers are increasingly defined by pivots, yet the systems that support mobility have not kept pace.**

Our education and workforce systems remain oriented toward a more stable, linear labor market, rather than continuous navigation. They often fail to provide individuals with the resources they need to navigate shifting opportunities—including access to labor market information, social networks, economic stability, navigation skills, and career guidance. As a result, those resources remain unevenly distributed.

Drawing on a two-year mixed-methods study—including a nationally representative survey of 1,009 low-wage workers and 264 community college students and 74 interviews and focus groups with workers, students, and career coaches—this paper examines how individuals gather and interpret career information, respond to disruption, build skills, and pursue career advancement. When navigation supports are weak or inaccessible, workers and learners with the least margin for error bear the greatest risk of economic stagnation. **Our findings suggest that disparities in career navigation resources constrain individuals' ability to access economic opportunity and investments to support effective career navigation should be assessed as a public good.**

Key Findings

Careers are shaped by pivots, not pathways.

The low-wage workers and community college students in our study experienced careers marked by repeated pivots, often in response to external shocks. Participants described multiple career switches, exits, and re-entries across both education and employment, often driven by layoffs, shifting caregiving responsibilities, health challenges, immigration, academic misalignment, or the vagaries of the business cycle.

While some transitions advanced long-term goals, nearly half of participants' career moves were lateral or reactive. As a result, career progression is not linear, and mobility increasingly depends on individuals' ability to navigate repeated transitions under constraint. Outcomes were shaped by structural conditions: access to reliable information, the depth and diversity of social networks, stable employment, and coaching support. In their absence, learners and workers experienced false starts and perpetual cycles of low-wage work, even when motivated to advance.

Information is abundant but unreliable—and difficult to interpret.

Online platforms have expanded access to career information, but without a corresponding improvement in information clarity. Participants consistently reported encountering misleading or opaque job postings and automated systems that generate minimal feedback, leading to strong mistrust of online information. The challenge is not access to information alone, but the ability to interpret and act on it. In many cases, institutions fail to translate labor market signals into actionable guidance.

While most workers and students expressed confidence in their understanding of their "ideal career," far fewer could name specific employers in those fields in our survey. Without trusted intermediaries, like well-informed career counselors or employment specialists, to interpret labor market signals, individuals must

reconcile conflicting or incomplete information on their own, complicating decision-making. Generative AI tools show potential to synthesize and personalize information, but uneven digital literacy and limited quality controls risk amplifying existing inequalities.

Social capital shapes access to opportunity.

Family and friends are the most common sources of career information. Those networks provide emotional support and encouragement, but frequently lead to jobs within a limited set of industries, often reinforcing occupational clustering in low-wage jobs. At the same time, opaque hiring systems and automated screening tools create additional barriers, limiting who is considered for roles.

Connections that cross sectors and income levels are less common, especially among low-wage workers, but remain pivotal. Participants who developed relationships with professors, supervisors, or hiring managers often described those connections as critical in accessing new roles. In an AI-mediated hiring environment, referrals and internal endorsements often determine who advances to interviews. Social networks, therefore, function as both support systems and gatekeeping structures.

Job quality enables—or constrains—the capacity to navigate.

Wages, schedules and commutes directly influenced participants' ability to engage in career navigation activities. When income is insufficient or hours are unpredictable, individuals prioritize immediate stability over advancement.

A living wage functions as a threshold condition, without which participants report limited time and cognitive space for reflection, job search, or training. Once basic needs are met, advancement opportunities, workplace environment, and supervisor support—all conditions that enable effective career navigation—become key drivers of job preference.

Amid labor market uncertainty, churn, and limited mobility, some participants identified entrepreneurship as a path to improved job quality and agency, though access to that career path is less clear.

Navigation skills are critical but developed through trial and error.

Surveys and interviews indicate high worker self-confidence in durable skills, particularly social skills, and navigation skills. Those competencies—self-advocacy, persistence, strategic job search, and networking—are typically developed through experience rather than formal instruction.

As careers become more dynamic and transition-heavy, durable and navigation skills become more important to achieving economic security. Workers must continually assess and adapt to the evolving workplace, but structured opportunities to build such capacities are largely absent from education and training programs.

Career guidance is essential but under-resourced.

Career coaches play a critical role in helping workers and learners interpret information, identify and access opportunities, and maintain momentum during transitions. Yet, access to coaching services remains limited.

The coaches we interviewed described significant constraints: high caseloads, little formal training, unclear job descriptions, and lack of digital tools and resources. They are expected to be knowledgeable about evolving technologies and skills demands, often without the labor market data or training they need to track and interpret trends. In practice, many provide support far beyond career advising, including helping clients access housing, childcare and health coverage.

Policy and Practice Implications

Together, findings suggest that career mobility is shaped by access to a set of interdependent resources that support career navigation over time. Strengthening career navigation infrastructure across education, workforce, and employment systems is a societal imperative. Based on our findings, we identify six recommendations:

- 1. Strengthen information infrastructure.** Career information should be curated, transparent, and embedded within trusted institutions. Generative

AI tools show promise but require safeguards to prevent bias and ensure accuracy.

- 2. Cultivate mechanisms to broaden social networks.** Education and workforce strategies should intentionally build cross-income and cross-sector connections through work-based learning, structured mentoring, and place-based initiatives.
- 3. Improve job quality to enable advancement.** Basic elements of a job—including adequate wages, predictable schedules, and reasonable commutes—are prerequisites for enabling active career navigation. Employers should clarify advancement pathways and strengthen managerial support.
- 4. Build navigation skills for a volatile labor market.** Skills such as decision-making, adaptability, and resilience should be embedded as core competencies across education and training systems. Institutions should support guided reflection, career mapping, and coached decision-making.
- 5. Invest in career coaching across the education-to-work continuum.** Career coaching should be funded, structured, and integrated as essential infrastructure. Coaches must have manageable caseloads, access to digital tools and labor market information, and professionalized pathways.
- 6. Align education and workforce systems around mobility.** Greater coordination—rather than isolated interventions—is needed to support long-term mobility. Public and private actors should align incentives, invest in intermediaries, modernize data systems, and strengthen the social safety net to enable long-term advancement.

The Road Ahead

Career navigation is the ongoing process of acquiring information, making decisions, and taking action in pursuit of career goals. As labor markets become more dynamic and less predictable and AI continues to disrupt careers, this capability increasingly determines who progresses and who stalls.

Policymakers, educators, employers, and intermediaries must coordinate to build navigation infrastructure that provides equitable access to reliable information, professional networks, economic stability, navigation skills, and institutional guidance. Without it, workers and learners will continue to shoulder the risk of stagnation and enjoy fewer opportunities to advance.