15 Ways to Engage Youth Within Your Company and Why You Should Do It

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I. INTRODUCTION

Leaders in both the public and private sectors have increasingly acknowledged that society has an obligation to include the next generation in the decision-making processes that will shape their future. Young people (ages 12-18) seem to agree, and they have expressed a growing desire to be actively consulted on issues that matter to them. From environmental protection and climate change to social justice and mental health, youth are increasingly voicing their questions, concerns, and hopes about the future. Input from the next generation is particularly crucial when it comes to navigating the challenges of new technologies.

Youth movements, developments in the legal arena, and initiatives by corporations and NGOs offer the promise of enhancing youth participation in business and government for the decades to come. Gradually, the emphasis is likely to shift from arguing why we need more youth participation to the question of how to enable youth engagement in practice.

WHY YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

There are manifold reasons, normative and practical, to engage youth when making decisions that affect their futures. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to highlight a normative example, grants every child a right to express their views freely on all matters and decisions that affect them and to have those views considered at all levels of society. Or more recently, in response to a lawsuit brought by young climate activists, the German Constitutional Court ordered the government to expand a law aimed at bringing Germany's carbon emissions down to nearly zero by 2050, acknowledging that the young people have had their liberties violated by the government's failure to pass stringent enough legislation. Climate justice and social justice for the next generation are moral, and increasingly also legal, imperatives.

In addition to compelling normative positions that require us to take the next generation's interest into account, a wealth of insights and experiences gained through actual youth engagement suggest its promise. Our fieldwork, for instance, has revealed how youth involvement can support decision-making in a rapidly changing world where tech development and youth behavior require real-time reality checks and evidence gathering. Youth engagement in critical areas, such as privacy, personalisation, or self-determination, can also help bridge the gap between adult and youth perspectives, thereby enhancing interoperability. Along similar lines, youth and adults may not always agree what the problems are in any given situation. This is not to say young people are always right; however, their unique perspective can help institutions identify blind spots and make better informed choices that are mindful of the diversity of youth attitudes, experiences, and background. Opening these channels of communication will help to ensure new technologies, services, and products are more inclusive and their benefits more widespread.
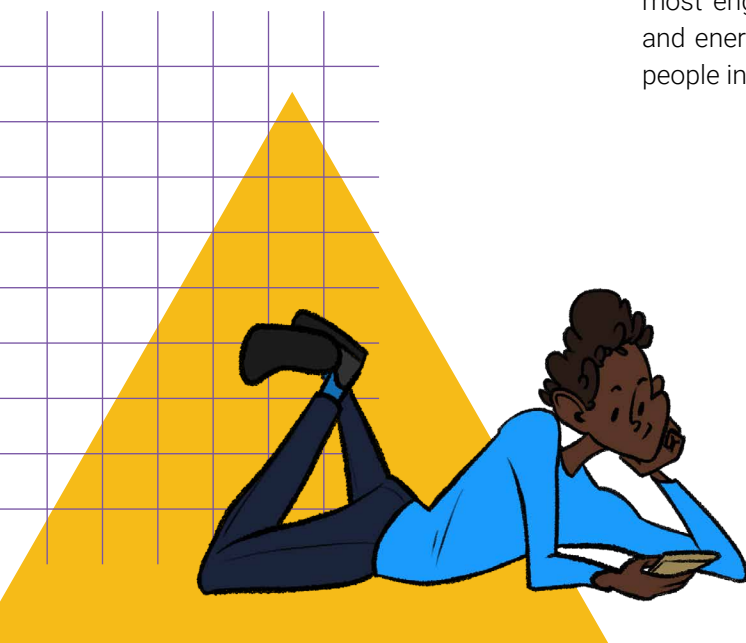
YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MODELS

With increased interest in engaging youth comes the question of how to engage youth meaningfully and what types of models, programs, spaces, and methodologies youth would find most valuable to engage with. Across many different geographies and contexts, researchers have begun systematically documenting a broad range of models that can enable youth engagement within a company and across other sectors. The Youth and Media team at the Berkman Klein Center, for instance, has identified fifteen models and, with the International Telecommunication Union, asked youth through a global online consultation to share their perspectives on these models and identify which one they would find most valuable (Cortesi, Hasse, & Gasser, 2021).

Each of the engagement models represented in this diverse array comes with its own goals, purposes, levels of commitment, durations, and modalities. Some models are more traditional (e.g., summer internship or a paid job) while others are newer/ less established (e.g., youth lab, youth board, co-design spaces). When selecting an engagement model, it is key to identify where within the company the youth engagement should take place and which model is best suited for that space. For example, when thinking about current or future products, a lab bringing together youth with a product development team might be a good choice. However, if the goal is to think critically about a company's strategy, then a board that brings together youth with senior executives might be more helpful. Also, these models are not mutually exclusive (e.g., one can host a youth lab over the summer and frame it as a summer internship opportunity), and they can take place simultaneously (e.g., one can invite youth lab participants to meetings/ conferences/summits).

Open creative local spaces ("Youth Labs") where young people can share their perspectives, learn new skills, and find mentors and support

Offer youth a free school/community program to learn digital skills where youth get a certificate at the end

Create a leaders program for young people to advise the organization on youth-related matters

Support youth in being entrepreneurial and build their own start-ups/companies

Invite youth to meetings/ conferences/summits

Support and participate in youth community development or civic engagement projects

Offer paid jobs for young people ages 16-18

Invite youth to suggest research topics, questions, or challenges others should study

Invite youth to have their work featured on the organization's platforms

Invite youth to participate in surveys and interviews

Offer a summer internship for young people

Offer a gap year program to explore academic and professional interests

Send their staff to events organized by young people

Engage with the young people already working in their organization

Connect youth with people in their community who have worked with those organizations

Results from the study showed that, across models, youth are interested in participating and sharing their perspectives and ideas with others, but the findings also make clear that engaging youth is not a simple undertaking; most engagement models require a great deal of investment, thought, and energy both from the company (and its employees) and the young people involved.

CENTERING YOUTH

Centering youth's rights, needs, and expectations when designing engagement models leads to more valuable and meaningful overall experiences for participating youth. To that extent, it can be helpful for company leaders to articulate why or how the engagement (or parts of it) is valuable for participating youth. Monetary incentives or the like (e.g., gifts, raffles, gadgets, and products) are an important start, but companies should go beyond that. Youth also want to learn skills that are not being taught in traditional educational settings and receive feedback on their input, creating pathways for mutual exchange and collaboration. Many youth seek long-term inclusion and ask that the engagement models are aligned with their career goals. Youth also value company-facilitated connections with adult mentors who can offer consistent career counseling and exposure to job pathways that blend their skills and interests. The following four mechanisms and related challenges are particularly worth highlighting when exploring how to best center youth (Cortesi, Hasse, & Gasser, 2021):

1. **Equity and inclusion:** Not all youth are able to participate under the same terms. Significant disparities in participation persist for youth across multiple dimensions, such as geographic location, skill and education level, social class, race, age, and gender. It's crucial to create programs that are responsive to the cultural, political, economic, and social contexts that shape young people's everyday lives. It is also essential to consider ways to make participation efforts even more inclusive and accessible to youth from different socioeconomic statuses (e.g., by providing financial support), geographic regions, and communities.
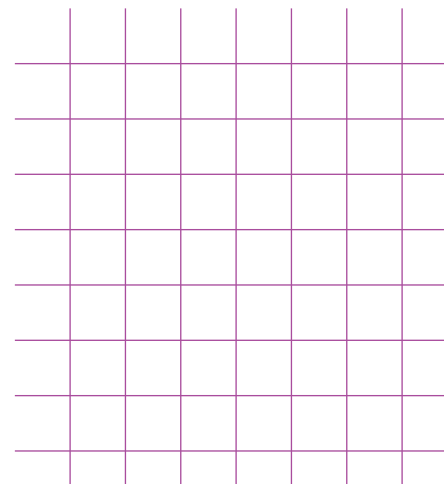
2. **Expectations:** Many models require youth to spend significant time and other resources in addition to having relatively packed schedules/lives. As such, participation needs to be seen as a dynamic (rather than gradual or linear) process and include varying degrees and modes of participation. We recommend not viewing specific forms of participation as more valuable or desirable than others, as even seemingly mundane activities can lead to powerful outcomes or serve as entry points for further types of engagement.

3. **Power differentials:** A common challenge in youth participation models entails shifting the power structure inherent in adult-youth relationships. It may then be useful for adults involved in such models to consider the power resources people have or lack, the position that different people involved take in this power structure, and how these power dynamics allow or prevent youth's participation in actions and decisions.

4. **Oversight:** Since implementing participation models can be quite complex, it may be helpful to consider the involvement of an oversight entity that keeps track of all elements and helps ensure the young people's rights and best interests remain as guiding principles throughout the process. In academia, such an entity could be an ethics review board. In contexts where such review boards are not available, consulting with experts is advised.

WHO IN A COMPANY CAN ENGAGE YOUTH AND HOW
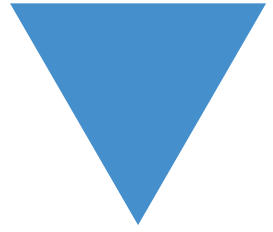
Centering youth's rights, needs, and expectations should always come first and be an unquestionable requirement when designing and implementing youth engagement models within a company. That being said, based on evidence from research and practical experience, we have identified three additional key questions a company should think through when designing and implementing a youth engagement model, in order to maximize the impact of the overall effort:

1. What is the value of youth engagement for the company?

2. What makes the engagement (or parts of it) valuable for participating employees?

3. To what extent does youth engagement benefit a product (e.g., a consumer product, campaign, business strategy) or multiple products?

The following section highlights some of Youth and Media's observations and takeaways, gained by accompanying the design and implementation of the Tages-Anzeiger Youth Lab and why we believe addressing the "added value" for these other three enablers (i.e., company, employees, product) is crucial.

> **The Tages-Anzeiger Youth Lab.** Tages-Anzeiger is a German-language national daily newspaper published in Switzerland. The Tages-Anzeiger Youth Lab consisted of a physical space within the company that brought together youth (ages 17-19) with journalists and other employees within the company. The youth lab's program entailed 13 sessions that took place over the course of three months. There were 32 youth participants and over 35 employees that participated. Most sessions were attended by 16 youth and co-led by three employees (in addition to the core youth lab team). One key goal of the youth lab was to learn from youth, the future target audience as well as future talents, and their digital behaviors, attitudes, and preferences with regard to the future requirements for products, services, and processes.
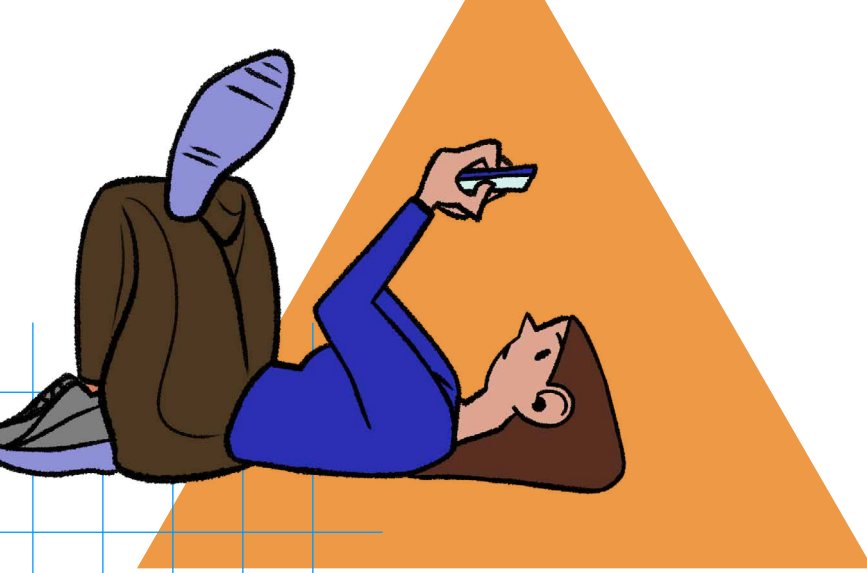
The company. There are companies that engage youth without making it known to the broader public or even well-known within the company walls. Less visible youth engagement can be of high value to the company but, in our experience, raises even more strongly the question of benefits for a specific product or the employees (more to that below). A publicly visible youth engagement can also be of value to a company. The Tages-Anzeiger Youth Lab was well-visible within the company as well as the broader public. Providing youth with a space where they are heard, empowered to contribute to something relevant, and given the means to learn and help co-create the world they will eventually inherit was perceived as positive. Particularly, the youth lab signaled to its employees that the company was willing to engage in a creative and forward-looking project that preemptively addresses questions about the future of the newspaper and the media ecosystem more broadly.

Helpful design choices the Tages-Anzeiger Youth Lab has made: Much effort went into documenting and sharing the vision, design, and implementation as well as takeaways and outcomes gained through the different sessions. The Youth Lab had a companywide Slack channel, which was highlighted multiple times in the company's newsletter, and was featured at several internal events and meetings. The Youth Lab also received significant attention in the media (e.g., other newspapers, radio, TV).

Employees. The benefit of youth engagement to adults, whether board members or junior employees, is a commonly forgotten variable. Why is this important? To some extent, especially within a company, engaging with youth tends to be someone's "job." However, in our experience, the adults are not only key during the engagement, but also afterwards. A mission of the Tages-Anzeiger Youth Lab was to make the employees' engagement a true learning opportunity, a possibility to share knowledge and expertise, become a mentor to participating youth, collaborate with others outside of one's typical team, and escape from their daily routines to partake in a novel opportunity. This created many adult allies and champions that helped advocate for some continuation of the project, shared knowledge proactively, or served as ambassadors of the project to the outside world.

Helpful design choices the Tages-Anzeiger Youth Lab has made: The sessions were structured in a way so that employees had an opportunity to share their expertise (through "job talks" and specific skill sharing sessions) and could learn new knowledge that directly impacted their work (to ensure all sessions were co-designed with participating employees). Employees were also asked to document their learnings and capture them in diverse ways (e.g., surveys, a quote, video interviews). While this required more effort, the documentation did help employees reflect on their experiences and articulate valuable elements.

The product (e.g., a consumer product, campaign, business strategy). The Tages-Anzeiger Youth Lab was structured around ten key questions. While each session was designed in a way such that insights would either inform existing products or help imagine new ones, some conversations were broader/ less structured (e.g., discussing the future of news and young people's information ecosystem, reimagining payment options). As such, it was not always straightforward to figure out how an exchange may directly benefit a current or future product.

Helpful design choices the Tages-Anzeiger Youth Lab has made: The Youth Lab had a team that documented all activities and conversations. Employees that were part of the Youth Lab were asked to note their main takeaways and how what they had learned in the lab would inform their work moving forward. A clear goal for employees was to come up with 2-4 products that were either new and based on learnings from the youth lab or a modification of an existing product, where the company could clearly measure how the project improved due to the knowledge gained during the Youth Lab. Having these product success stories is key – particularly when talking to employees or people in the business sector.

OUTLOOK

The observations shared here demonstrate how meaningful youth engagement might look in practice. Considering how all stakeholders – youth, the company, the employees, and the product – work in concert might be particularly helpful when thinking about longer term strategy and sustainability in this area. Overall, company leaders who seek to explore this field further are encouraged to take a pragmatic approach in terms of "thoughtful experimentation." Start somewhere concrete and learn over time. "Build, iterate, and expand" is the credo in the emerging theory and practice of youth engagement.

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Cortesi, S., Hasse, A., & Gasser, U. (2021). Youth participation in a digital world: Designing and implementing spaces, programs, and methodologies. Youth and Media, Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society. https://cyber.harvard.edu/publication/2021/youth-participation-in-a-digital-world