



ATHENA
INFONOMICS



THE ROAD TO YUTOPIA

A Public, Private & Youth Collective

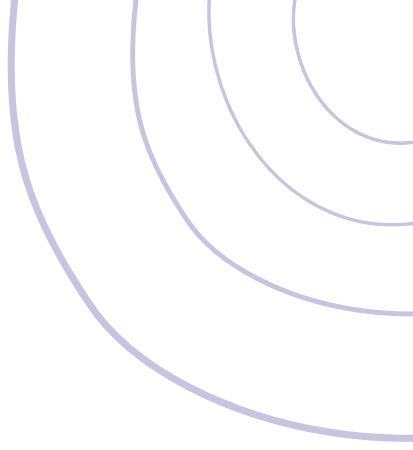
Youth Centrality at Workplaces Framework





A Public, Private & Youth Collective





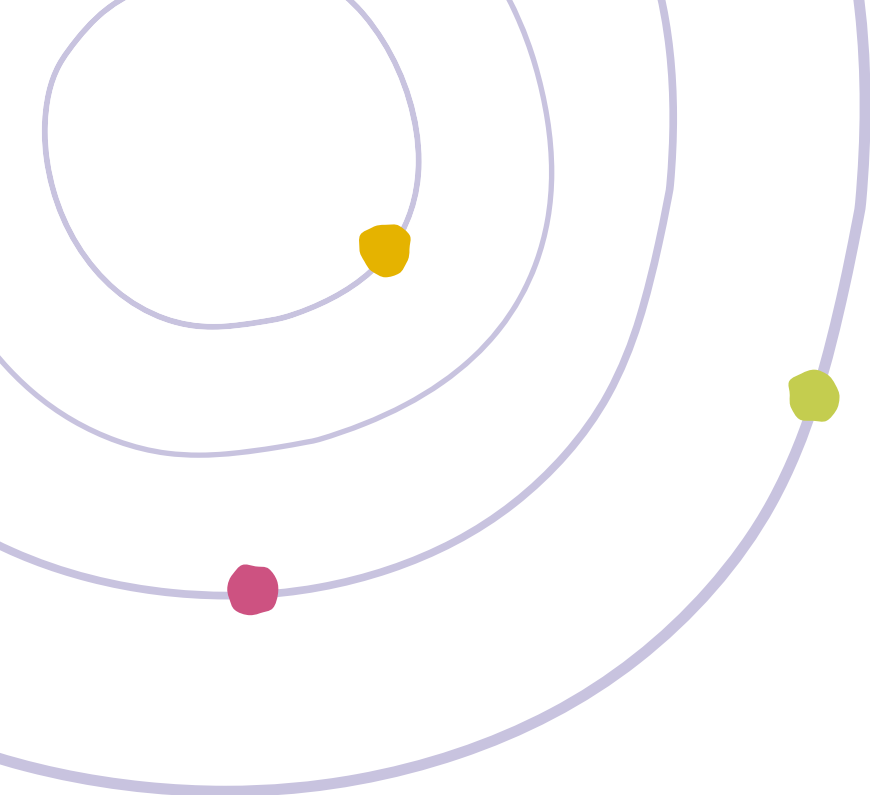
THE ROAD TO YUTOPIA

Youth Centrality at the Workplace: A Framework for Business Action

This integrated framework is designed for businesses and organisations that employ young employees (aged 18-29). It provides a strategic and practical guide for embedding youth voice, agency and leadership across workplace systems, from recruitment and culture to governance and innovation.

Grounded in rights-based principles and informed by global best practices, the framework recognises young employees not as passive beneficiaries or a “future workforce,” but as current contributors with the capacity to shape decisions, influence strategy and drive organisational value. It is action-oriented and future-focused, helping institutions move beyond symbolic inclusion toward meaningful partnership, shared decision-making and intergenerational collaboration.

By positioning youth employees as equal partners, leaders and co-creators, the framework supports businesses in building inclusive, resilient and future-ready workplaces.



Introduction: Why Youth Centrality Matters

Young Employees are
Shaping the Future of Work



Young individuals (15–29 years) represent over 1.8 billion individuals globally, nearly one in five people on Earth¹. By 2030, an estimated 600 million new jobs will be needed to absorb the growing youth workforce². Young employees are recognised by the United Nations as critical agents of change for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, contributing creativity, energy and innovation to social transformation³.

In this larger context, the demographic profile of India presents a structural economic advantage. With a median age of 28.4 years in 2023, India is among the youngest major economies globally⁴. Projections indicate that this favourable age structure can support growth through mid-century if employment generation keeps pace with labour force expansion⁵. The significant presence of youth in India, who represent nearly 28 per cent of the population India, firmly underscores the centrality of their potential role as in shaping the country's social and economic trajectory⁶, nearly 47 per cent of early-stage entrepreneurs globally are aged 18–34⁷, and firm-age research finds that young firms account for a disproportionate share of net employment growth⁸. In India, entrepreneurship is closely linked to human capital density and contributes meaningfully to local job creation and productivity expansion⁹.

However, research indicates that a youthful population yields a dividend but only when matched with productive employment and sustained human capital investment¹⁰. Structural barriers such as skills mismatches and high NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) rates, limit youth participation in productive work and decision-making¹¹. When such challenges are considered together, they illustrate some of the systemic barriers that hinder the full participation of young people in the world of work, including but not limited to:

- Underemployment and skills mismatches^{12 13 14}
- Misalignment with employee purpose and aspirations resulting in reduced retention
- Exclusion from leadership and decision-making¹⁵
- Lack of access to decent work, mentorship and career/growth pathways as highlighted in Youth2030 progress reports¹⁶
- High rates of burnout¹⁷, mental health challenges and workplace inequity

At the other end of the spectrum, on a supply side, businesses often face talent shortages, innovation stagnation and employee retention challenges¹⁸. Cumulatively, both supply and demand experience barriers that can be resolved for mutual benefit. Analysis shows that investments in human capital and labour force participation are strongly associated with long-run productivity growth¹⁹, and meta-analyses of youth employment interventions indicate statistically significant gains in employment and earnings outcomes²⁰. Youth integration into quality work therefore delivers measurable economic returns.

Estimates suggest that 44 per cent of workers' core skills will change within five years due to technological disruption, positioning younger workforce cohorts, often more recently trained and digitally immersed, to accelerate organisational adaptation.

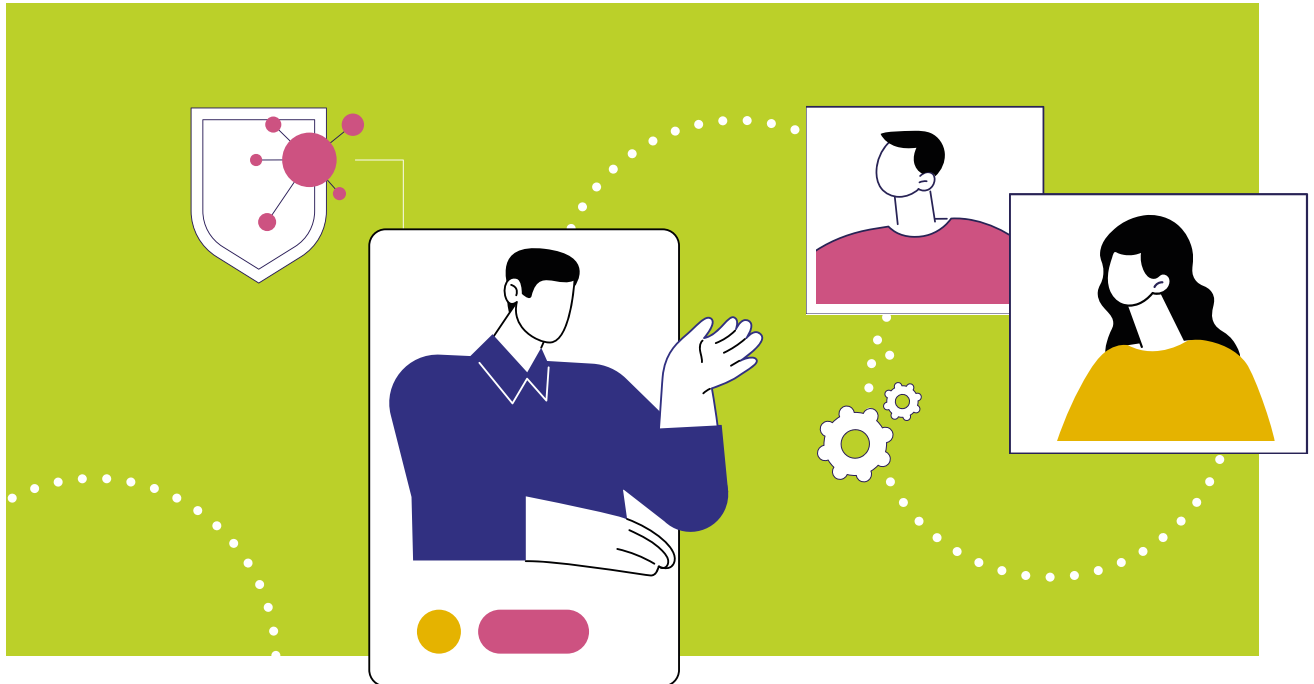
At the other end of the spectrum, on a supply side, businesses often face talent shortages, innovation stagnation and employee retention challenges¹⁸. Cumulatively, both supply and demand experience barriers that can be resolved for mutual benefit. Analysis shows that investments in human capital and labour force participation are strongly associated with long-run productivity growth¹⁹, and meta-analyses of youth employment interventions indicate statistically significant gains in employment and earnings outcomes²⁰. Youth integration into quality work therefore delivers measurable economic returns.

The present landscape of jobs is being persistently reorganised as a response to emerging technological adoptions and wider industry-based paradigm shifts. These changes are further increasing demand for higher-order cognitive and digital skills. Interestingly, it has been observed that automation shifts labour demand toward more adaptable and digitally capable workers²¹, while AI-driven restructuring raises returns to problem-solving and complementary skills²². Estimates suggest that 44 per cent of workers' core skills will change within five years due to technological disruption²³, positioning younger workforce cohorts, often more recently trained and digitally immersed, to accelerate organisational adaptation.



The Shifting Needs of a New Generation²⁴

The young workers of today, particularly Gen Z, are fundamentally different from previous generations in their values, expectations and lived realities. They entered adulthood during a period of unprecedented global disruption: the pandemic, climate emergencies, economic uncertainty and rapid technological change. These experiences have significantly influenced how they view work, well-being and their role in organisations.



Post-Pandemic Shifts

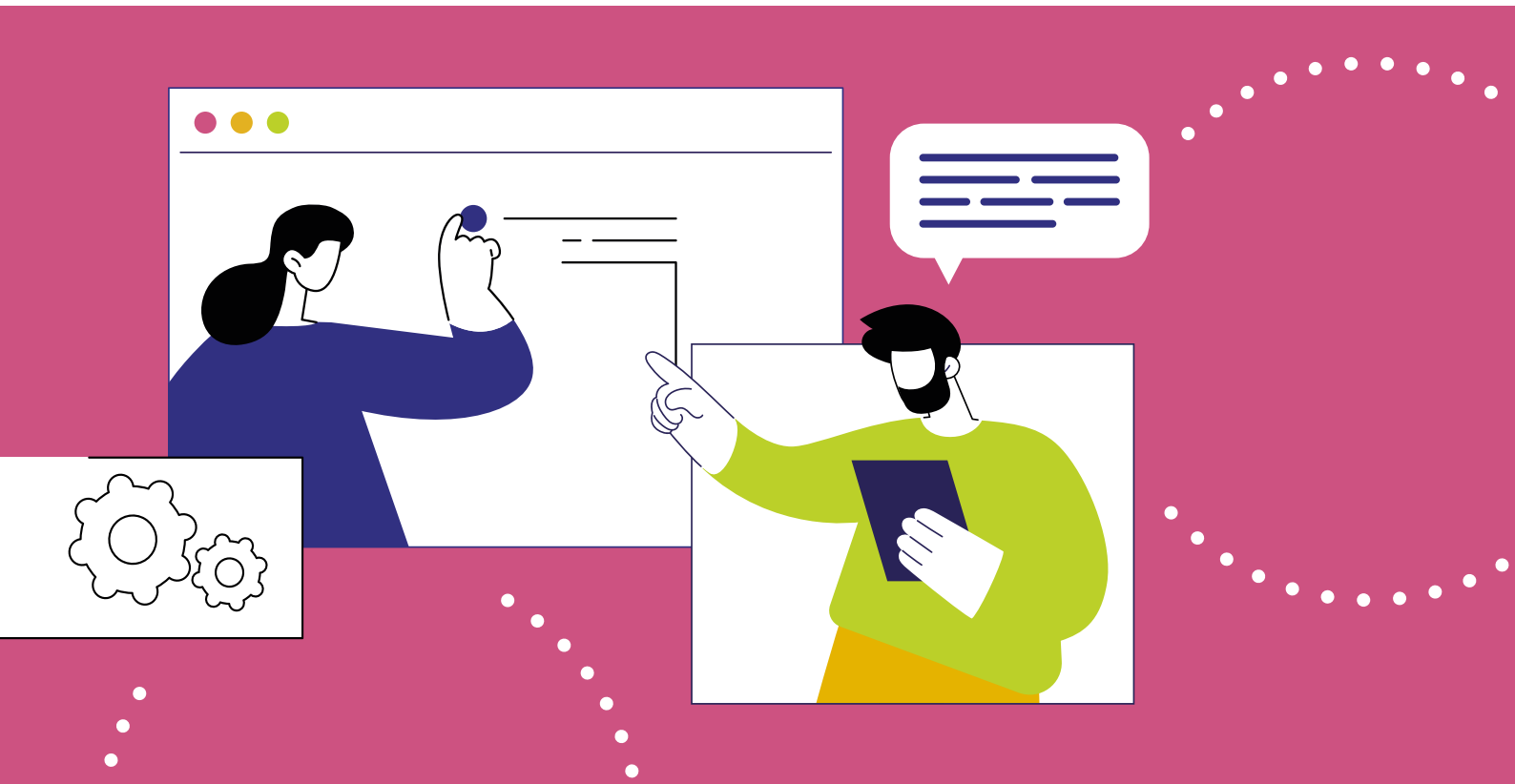
The pandemic acted as a catalyst for lasting changes in the world of work, many of which disproportionately affected youth. Illustratively, remote and hybrid work models have evolved from temporary solutions into a defining feature of the modern workplace. According to the EY Work Reimagined Survey 2024, most employees—especially younger generations—now expect flexibility in how and where they work, with many viewing rigid, office-based structures as outdated. The survey finds that flexible schedules, autonomy and work-life balance rank among the top priorities for Gen Z and millennial workers, signalling a permanent shift away from traditional notions of presenteeism and one-size-fits-all work

models²⁵. In this context, autonomy refers to decentralized decision-making and the agency to self-select tools and workflows (such as AI) to solve complex problems. This signals a shift toward a 'Talent Advantage' model where performance is measured by strategic impact rather than rigid, office-based presenteeism.

As the global talent market evolves, traditional models centered on physical presence and centralized decision-making are being supplemented by more agile frameworks. For the modern workforce, long-term engagement is increasingly tied to organizational trust and the flexibility to adapt to rapid technological change.



Technology as Identity and Infrastructure



For many young people, technology is not just a skill, it is part of identity, expression and livelihood.

Those with consistent digital access are more likely to be adept in social media, AI tools, digital collaboration platforms and self-directed online learning. Their familiarity with emerging technologies positions them as key drivers of innovation within connected workplaces.

At the same time, the rise of AI and automation brings both opportunity and uncertainty²⁶. While many young workers are early adopters of new tools, they also express concerns about job displacement and the pace of change²⁷. They look to employers not just to use technology²⁸, but to support reskilling, ethical deployment and inclusive digital transformation.

However, this digital fluency is not universal. A significant proportion of

young people—especially those from rural areas, lower-income households and marginalised communities—remain digitally disenfranchised, lacking access to reliable internet, devices or digital literacy training²⁹. Evidence shows that even as smartphone ownership rises among Indian rural youth, large disparities persist in the ability to perform basic online tasks or apply digital skills productively³⁰. Globally, it is observed that while 79 per cent of young people are online, access remains highly uneven by gender, geography³¹.

For employers, recognising this inequity is essential. Building equitable pathways into the digital workplace, be it through affordable connectivity, inclusive skilling or targeted outreach, ensures that technological transformation empowers, rather than excludes, the next generation of workers.



Demand for Purpose, Participation and Well-Being

Gen Z places strong emphasis on:

Purpose-driven work:

They seek alignment between personal values and organisational mission, often prioritising impact over prestige³³.

Mental well-being:

They expect workplaces to offer accessible mental health resources, normalise conversations around stress and protect boundaries including the right to disconnect³⁴.

Meaningful inclusion and co-creation:

They reject tokenism and performative engagement. Instead, they demand real influence over decisions that affect their roles, growth and workplace culture³⁵.

Workplace culture and accountability:

They expect organisations to foster inclusive, transparent and responsive cultures where leadership models equity, feedback leads to visible change and values are reflected in everyday practices³⁶.

This generation does not want to wait until they are older to lead. They want to co-design policies, contribute to strategy and shape organisational culture from day one³⁶. They value transparency, feedback and recognition and they thrive in environments where their voice leads to visible change. From an organisational vantage point, embedding young employees in governance and strategy strengthens agility in volatile markets. Younger workforce cohorts are often closest to emerging technologies, evolving consumer behaviour and new ways of working³⁷. Their inclusion reduces strategic blind spots, accelerates innovation cycles and improves responsiveness to market shifts³⁸.

The evidence linking employee engagement and voice to higher productivity, profitability and lower turnover further reinforces the return on investment³⁹. When young employees experience agency and growth, organisations benefit from stronger retention, higher performance and sustained innovation capacity. Youth centrality is not philanthropy; it is a competitive advantage grounded in talent optimisation, adaptability and long-term growth⁴⁰.





Gen Z and millennial professionals already account for nearly 70 per cent of India's technology workforce, with retention and productivity highest in companies offering continuous learning, flexibility and meaningful engagement.

Therefore, for the private sector, this generational shift of socio-cultural values represents more than a demographic reality: it is a strategic opportunity. By 2030, Gen Z and millennials will constitute nearly 60 per cent of the global workforce, redefining how organisations attract, retain and motivate talent⁴¹. Businesses that collaborate with youth through skilling partnerships, internships and participatory governance help close persistent education-employment gaps while securing future-ready talent pipeline⁴².

Industry data reinforces this imperative. Illustratively, Gen Z and millennial professionals already account for

nearly 70 per cent of India's technology workforce, with retention and productivity highest in companies offering continuous learning, flexibility and meaningful engagement⁴³. These findings point to a clear implication for business strategy. If young people contribute disproportionately to digital adaptation, innovation and entrepreneurial dynamism, confining them to execution roles limits organisational performance. Youth centrality therefore means moving beyond representation toward structured participation in decision-making, product development and transformation processes.



Meaningful Youth Engagement

The Journey So Far

The global movement for youth engagement has evolved over four decades from symbolic recognition to a demand for real inclusion.

It began in 1985 with the International Youth Year with the slogan “Participation, Development and Peace”, which catalyzed national action, including Government of India creating a dedicated Department of Youth Affairs and Sports in the same year followed by India’s first National Youth Policy (NYP) (1988)⁴⁴. The 1995 World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (WPAY) established the first UN-wide strategy covering 15 priority areas (education, employment, health, environment, etc.) for young people, while International Youth Day (12 August) was endorsed by United Nations General Assembly in 1999⁴⁵.

The 2010s marked a turning point. The Baku Global Forum on Youth Policies (2014) strengthened national strategies⁴⁶. Then came Youth2030: The UN Youth Strategy (2018)—a system-wide commitment to treat youth as partners.

Developed through global consultations, it prioritized youth participation across peace, development and human rights. In the 2020s, momentum grew. From 2021 to 2023, the UN and its partners advanced youth engagement through global dialogues and consultations on the SDGs, with a focus on digital connectivity, mental health and climate action, while the establishment of the UN Youth Office in 2023 and targeted initiatives responding to the pandemic’s impact have reinforced young people’s role as key agents of change in global governance.

India mirrored this progress. After National Youth Policy (NYP) 1988, NYP 2003 redefined youth (13–35 years) and emphasized empowerment. NYP 2014 narrowed the focus (15–29) and launched initiatives like Skill India, Khelo India and Rashtriya Yuva Sashaktikaran Karyakram (RYSK). Recently, India has released the draft National Youth Policy 2025 for public consultation, aligning it with the Sustainable Development Goals and emphasising youth empowerment, leadership and participation in national development⁴⁷.

This framework on meaningfully incorporating youth centrality with young employees has been built on decades of advocacy and action, offering corporate initiatives a principled path from consultation to co-ownership.



What is This Framework?

Given the urgent need for a paradigm shift, one that sees young people not as future leaders but as equal partners today, this framework serves as a principles-based guide for businesses and employers to move beyond contained engagement and toward meaningful youth inclusion in the workplace.

Drawing on the UNICEF Children's Rights and Business Principles (CRBP), developed jointly by UNICEF, the UN Global Compact and Save the Children, Arnstein's Ladder of Participation and global best practices⁴⁸, it redefines youth engagement as a rights-based, non-tokenistic process where young people are recognised as equal partners, leaders and changemakers.^{49 50}

Rather than prescribing rigid templates, the Youth Centrality at Workplaces Framework functions as a reflective compass to help companies and institutions:

- Understand where they currently stand in embedding youth perspectives across strategy, governance and workplace culture.
- Identify gaps between symbolic involvement and real influence in corporate decision-making.
- Align their human capital, inclusion and leadership practices with ethical, equitable and rights-based principles.
- Explore practical actions that foster youth agency, safety, innovation and sustainability within business systems.

Who Will Use it?

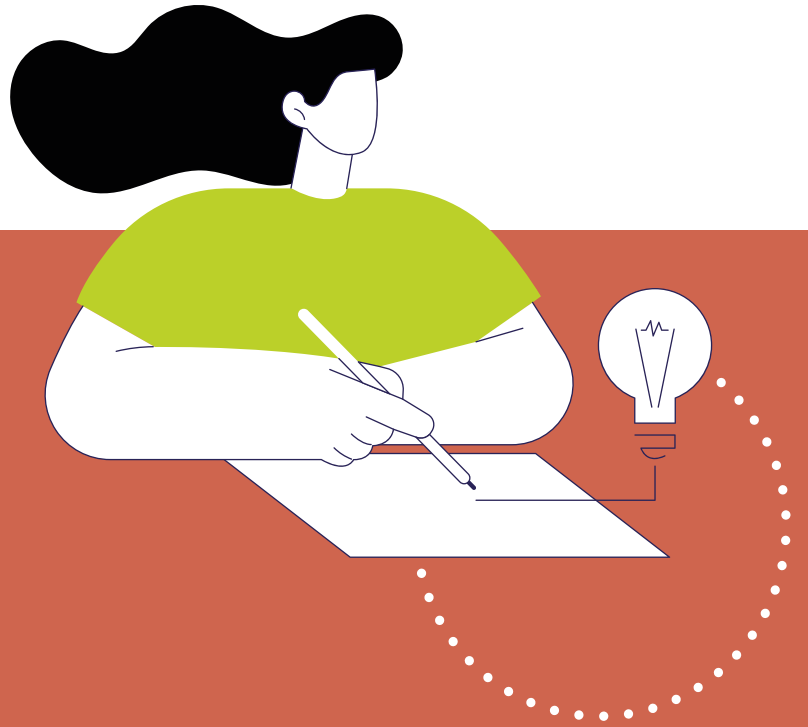
This framework is designed for corporate leaders, HR professionals and innovation units seeking to make their organisations more inclusive, future-ready and responsive to young talent. It is equally relevant for business associations, industry bodies and ecosystem partners that collaborate with youth networks or implement workplace transformation programmes. Whether you are shaping hiring practices, leadership pipelines or employee engagement strategies, the framework provides a structured lens to embed youth voice and agency across your organisation.

The Youth Centrality at Workplaces Framework can be applied as a strategic guide, it helps companies align policies, leadership practices and culture with the principles of youth inclusion, well-being and intergenerational collaboration.



Youth Centrality

A New Paradigm for Workplaces



Youth Centrality is the deliberate practice of engaging young employees (aged 18–29) as equal stakeholders and contributors within the workplace. It moves beyond viewing them as a “future workforce” to recognising their leadership and creativity in the present.

For businesses and institutions, Youth Centrality means:

- Young employees are seen, heard and valued for the unique perspectives they bring, including those from marginalised backgrounds.
- Their voices shape internal policies, product design, digital transformation and strategies.
- Workplaces prioritise inclusion, flexibility and well-being, ensuring safe, equitable, and rights-based environments so that every young worker can thrive without fear of exploitation, burnout or bias.
- Intergenerational equity is actively fostered through mentorship and shared leadership models that empower youth to lead today.

This approach moves beyond tokenism to meaningful participation: where youth have real influence, access to growth pathways and accountability mechanisms.

Guiding Principle: From Tokenism to Meaningful Partnership – Applying Arnstein’s Ladder to the Workplace

The notion of youth centrality is not merely about including young people, but the process itself through which the inclusion is facilitated. To ensure engagement is meaningful inclusion, the framework is guided by Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation⁵¹, adapted for workplace contexts.

Originally developed to assess public involvement in urban planning, the ladder helps organisations distinguish between symbolic inclusion and real power-sharing. When applied to youth in the workplace, it reveals a spectrum of engagement: from tokenism and consultation to co-decision-making and shared leadership.



LEVEL

Non- Participation

TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT

Youth are informed only superficially or placated with symbolic roles.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR WORKPLACES?

- One-way surveys without structured follow-up
- Youth on advisory panels without defined and/or actionable agency and decision-making power(s)
- Using youth voices within marketing efforts (for advocacy or promotional purposes) without consent or compensation
- Limited or absent integration of youth perspectives in internal processes



LEVEL

Tokenism

TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT

Youth are consulted or assigned advisory roles, but final decisions remain with senior leadership.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR WORKPLACES?

- Youth input gathered after strategic directions are largely set
- Feedback mechanisms exist, but influence on final decisions often ambiguous
- “Youth input” collected but not acted upon



LEVEL

Meaningful Participation & Power-Sharing

TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT

Youth have real influence and shared decision-making authority.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR WORKPLACES?

- Young employees involved from early stages of policy or programme design
- Youth employees included in committees that co-design policies and training programmes
- Leadership communicates how youth recommendations inform decisions
- Resources allocated to support youth-led initiatives
- Participation embedded in formal policies or governance structures

Other evidence-based models also inform this work:



Positive Youth Development (PYD):

Emphasises creating supportive environments where youth can build belonging, efficacy and skills.



Human-Centred Design (HCD):

Encourages co-creation, empathy and iterative feedback loops with youth.



Gallup Q12 Framework:

Highlights the importance of recognition, growth and manager support for engagement.



ILO Decent Work Agenda & UNICEF CRBP:

Provide the rights-based foundation for fair wages, safety and dignity.



Yutopia Youth Centrality Principles

These foundational principles guide the integration of youth centrality across policies, practices and culture.

Recognize Youth as Equal Stakeholders



WHAT IT MEANS

Young employees are current contributors to organisational performance and innovation, not only future leaders.

POTENTIAL BUSINESS ACTION

- Include young employees in cross-functional committees, innovation councils and strategy consultations.
- Establish structured youth advisory mechanisms with defined influence in decision-making.

Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Employment



WHAT IT MEANS

Employment systems expand access to diverse and underrepresented young talent.

POTENTIAL BUSINESS ACTION

- Implement inclusive recruitment pipelines, campus partnerships, skills-based hiring
- Adopting measurable diversity benchmarks for early-career roles.

Enable Co-Creation and Innovation



WHAT IT MEANS

Young employees contribute to shaping products, services and organisational change.

POTENTIAL BUSINESS ACTION

- Launch youth innovation labs, design sprints and reverse mentoring programmes.
- Integrate young employees into digital transformation task forces.

Invest in Skills and Learning Continuum



WHAT IT MEANS

Young employees are current contributors to organisational performance and innovation, not only future leaders.

POTENTIAL BUSINESS ACTION

- Continuous learning, explicitly oriented toward future-oriented capabilities, supports long-term employability and growth.

Foster Mentorship and Leadership Pathways



WHAT IT MEANS

Create visible pathways from entry-level roles to leadership positions for young employees.

POTENTIAL BUSINESS ACTION

- Establish structured mentorship and sponsorship programmes.
- Implement rotational assignments and succession planning mechanisms that include young talent.

Support Mental Health and Holistic Well-Being



WHAT IT MEANS

Workplace systems recognise the link between holistic well-being (mental, physical and social) and performance.

POTENTIAL BUSINESS ACTION

- Provisioning well-being resources, flexible work options
- Offering manager training for early-career support.
- Measure the percentage of young employees benefiting from wellness initiatives, awareness levels of wellbeing programmes, and participation rates in mental health or lifestyle offerings.

Promote Flexible and Adaptive Work Models



WHAT IT MEANS

Rigid 9-to-5 structures exclude many youth balancing education, caregiving, or side hustles. Align workplace structures with evolving expectations of younger workforce cohorts.

POTENTIAL BUSINESS ACTION

- Offering hybrid work, compressed weeks, job-sharing and results-based performance metrics.
- Normalization of flexible schedules as standard practice.

Amplify Youth Voice and Participation



WHAT IT MEANS

Ensure structured channels through which young employees can contribute to workplace policy, culture and strategic decisions.

POTENTIAL BUSINESS ACTION

- Conduct structured employee listening exercises, include youth representation in governance forums
- Reflecting youth workforce metrics in annual business and sustainability reporting.

Champion Youth in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)



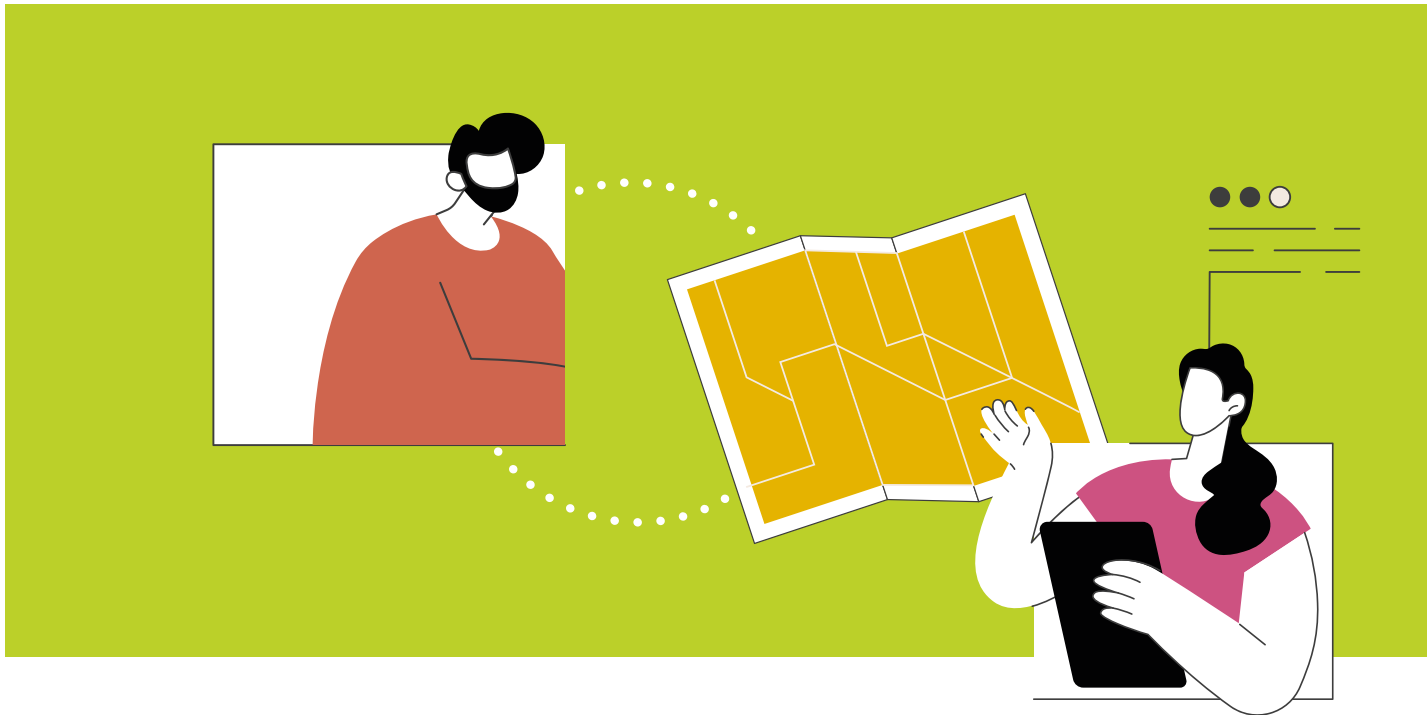
WHAT IT MEANS

Youth should not only benefit from CSR; they should lead it.

POTENTIAL BUSINESS ACTION

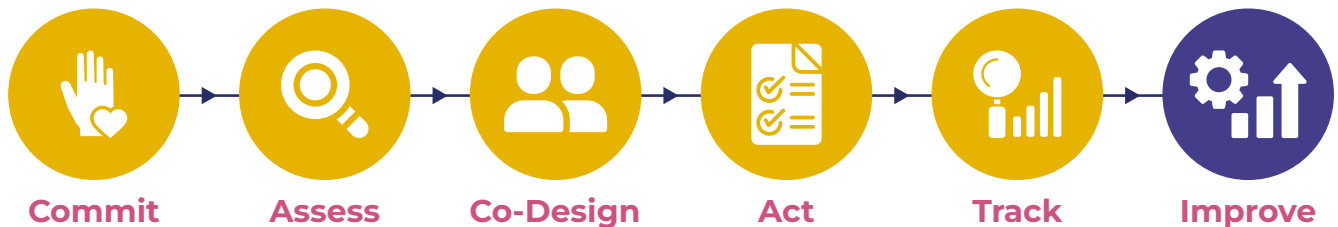
- Empower young employees to design and manage CSR initiatives.
- Fund youth-led community projects and social enterprises.

Implementation Roadmap: From Policy to Practice



This Implementation Roadmap is designed to help organisations move from aspiration to action on youth centrality. It translates the 9 Youth Centrality Principles into a practical, phased journey: from leadership commitment to continuous improvement.

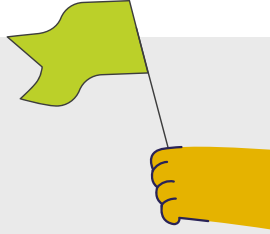
The roadmap follows a proven cycle of organisational change:



Inclusion must go beyond entry-level hiring or symbolic representation. Young employees should have defined opportunities to contribute to strategic planning, digital transformation initiatives, product development, organisational policies and governance. We must move beyond symbolic efforts and ensure they are equal partners, co-deciders and leaders in shaping workplace policies, culture and strategy. This roadmap provides the structure, accountability and sequencing needed to turn meaningful participation from a value into a practice.

Use this roadmap to:

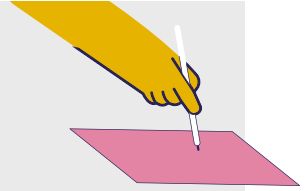
- **Secure leadership buy-in**
- **Plan and prioritise actions**
- **Assign ownership and timelines**
- **Track progress and report transparently**



PHASE
Leadership Commitment

ACTIONS

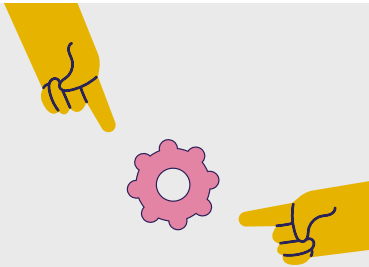
Secure CEO and board endorsement. Integrate youth Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) into executive performance goals. Publicly commit to youth centrality in mission and values.



PHASE
Policy Integration

ACTIONS

Embed youth principles into HR policies, codes of conduct, DEI strategies and ESG frameworks.



PHASE
Co-Design Solutions

ACTIONS

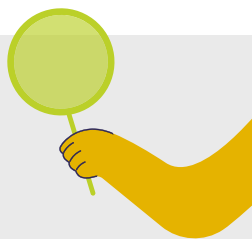
Partner with young employees to redesign recruitment, retention, mentorship and feedback systems. Use participatory design methods.



PHASE
Act & Integrate

ACTIONS

Implement the solutions and recommendations co-developed with young employees. Institutionalise agreed-upon practices across HR, operations and culture. Ensure accountability, resourcing and leadership support for sustained integration.



PHASE
Track & Communicate

ACTIONS

Monitor age-disaggregated data (hiring, pay, promotion, well-being). Incorporating the changes and insights into existing publications and/or considering specific Youth-focused publications, complementing the sustainability disclosures.



PHASE
Foster Continuous Improvement

ACTIONS

Establish a Youth Advisory Council who can support in conducting regular organisational audits. Pilot innovations (e.g., reverse mentoring). Scale what works. Update standards as needed.

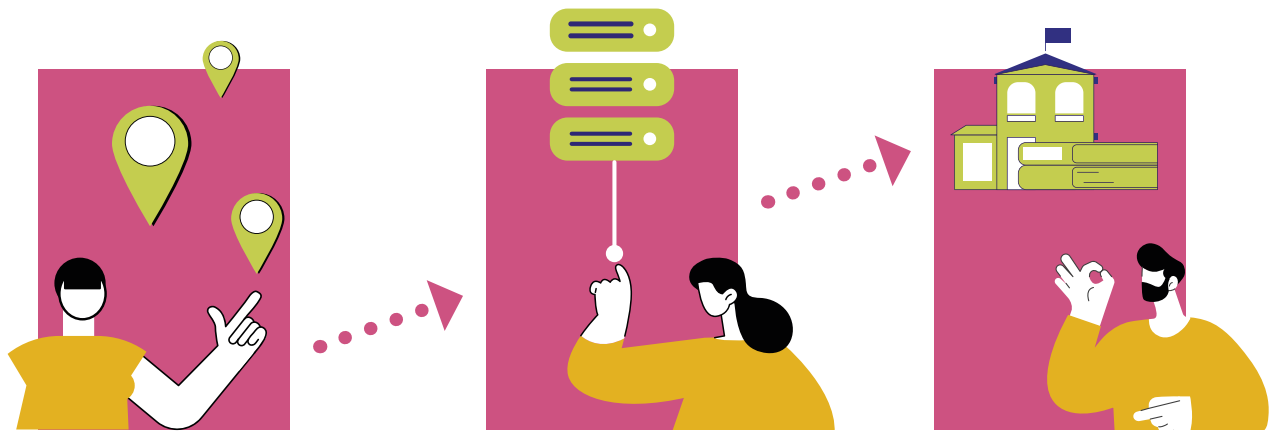


The Way Forward

A Progressive Adoption Pathway

Youth centrality is realised through the adoption and institutionalisation of the Yutopia Youth Centrality Principles. While organisations may begin with one or two focus areas, the depth and breadth of adoption determines the extent to which youth participation moves from consultation to shared influence.

Drawing inspiration from participation frameworks such as Arnstein's ladder, organisations can understand their progress across three broad stages:



Emerging
(1 - 3 Principles
Adopted)

Organisations that have adopted up to three principles and initiated implementation in selected areas. Youth voice may be present through consultations, pilot initiatives or advisory mechanisms, but influence remains limited to specific functions or projects.

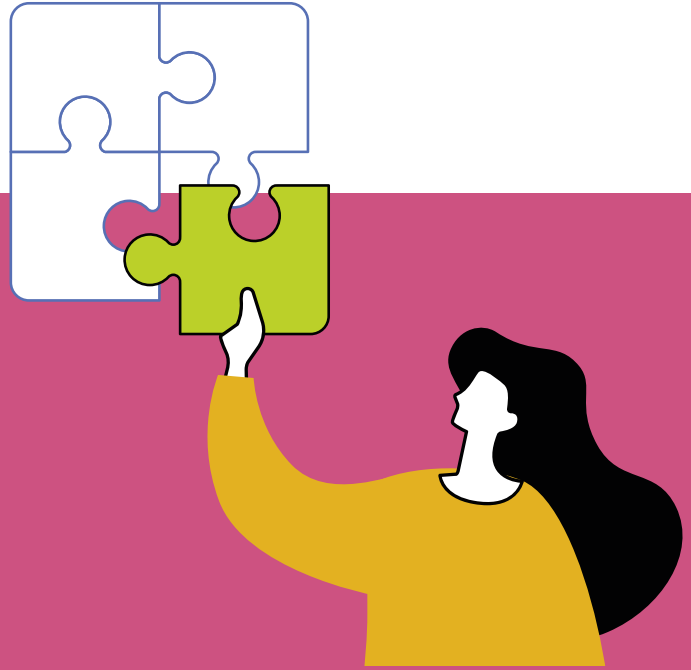
Progressing
(4 - 6 Principles
Adopted)

Organisations that have adopted four to six principles and embedded them across multiple systems. Youth participation extends beyond consultation, with structured mechanisms influencing strategy, talent practices and innovation processes.

Leading
(7 - 9 Principles
Adopted)

Organisations that have adopted seven or more principles and institutionalised youth centrality across governance, culture and operations. Young employees have sustained and structured influence in decision-making, supported by formal policies and accountability mechanisms.

Note: This layering is an intentionally simple, first-cut view of maturity, meant to help organisations sequence effort rather than rank importance. Where a given principle actually sits can shift with factors such as organisation size, sector, resourcing and existing HR operationalities, and a more nuanced model would weigh these dimensions explicitly rather than assume one fixed progression. The three-layer structure should therefore be read as a starting orientation for this framework, with room to evolve as adoption matures and more dimensions are incorporated.



Conclusion

A Call to Action

Youth centrality is not a policy add-on; it is a cultural transformation. It requires reimagining workplaces where:

- **Youth are seen as leaders today, not just tomorrow**
- **Their voices are heard, valued and acted upon**
- **Their well-being, growth and rights are non-negotiable**

When youth are positioned as central to growth and progress, organisations experience innovation, resilience and human-centric development. When the businesses invest in youth as growth prospects, the outcome is not a mere talent pipeline to be utilised but an overarching institution of work that is fairer and more inclusive than the one that precedes it.

Now, imagine further.

Imagine Yutopia — a world where every young person finds their own space and is able to grow across education, learning and professional prospects.

Where youth are not waiting for permission; they are leading.
Where workplaces are designed with them, not just for them.
Where intergenerational collaboration drives equity, innovation and dignity.
This is the vision championed by SAP and UNICEF YuWaah! Let us move beyond tokenism. Beyond consultation. Beyond incremental change.
Let us build workplaces where youth are not just included but centred.

Let us build Yutopia, together.

Footnotes

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