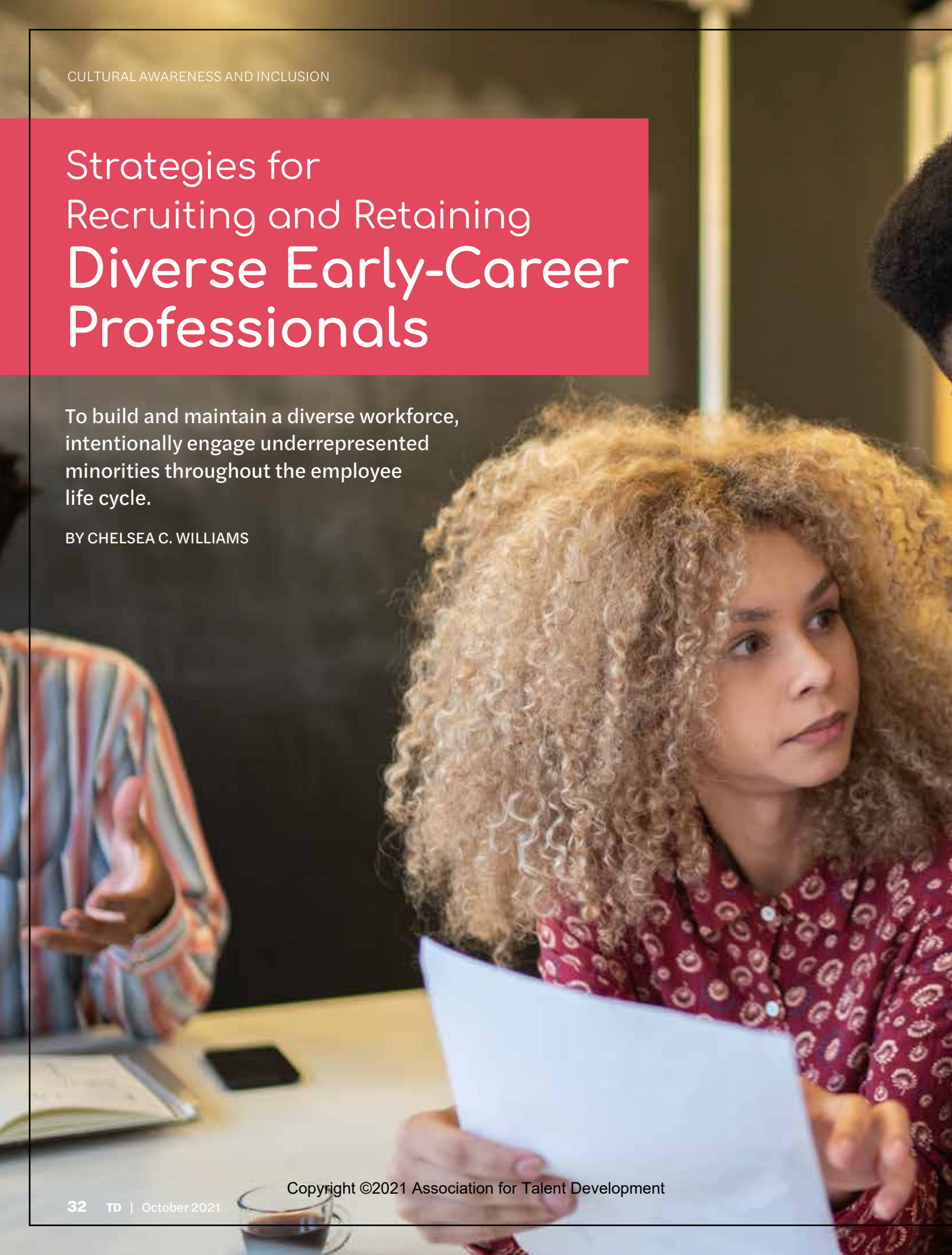


Strategies for Recruiting and Retaining Diverse Early-Career Professionals

To build and maintain a diverse workforce, intentionally engage underrepresented minorities throughout the employee life cycle.

BY CHELSEA C. WILLIAMS







In the US, Gen Z, the youngest talent within organizations today, represents more than one-quarter of the population and is the most racially diverse generation in the nation's history. Born after 1996, this emerging generation has charged employers to reimagine work—how, where, when, and why individuals work.

Washington State University's 2021 *Gen Z Spotlight Report* details the growing difference in Gen Z's employer preferences compared to other generations. Gen Z job seekers desire values-based employers, healthy work-life balance, and professional development and growth opportunities. Given those generational preferences and ideals, employers are now grappling with an essential question: How do we consciously attract, develop, and retain early-career talent with a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion?

With a mission to provide the critical link between the development and retention of early-career professionals, College Code has advised dozens of organizations around the world eager to support the next generation of diverse professionals and build a competitive talent pipeline within their companies. As the founder and CEO of College Code, I have gained a bird's-eye view of the challenges and opportunities that exist in building a diverse talent pipeline for the future.

Employers must consciously cultivate this early-career talent pipeline as early as K-12 and incorporate evaluation metrics that assess outcomes and impact over time. For companies that

may be considering early-career talent opportunities or that want to reimagine their current strategy or programming, the following practical steps will aid in achieving their goals.

Help students build occupational identity

Occupational identity is a sociological term that describes the degree to which a person's self-image is attached to their career. Because the term is rooted in sociology, it often connects with how individuals see themselves based on society's standards of success. As an example, racially diverse and gender-diverse students may be affected by societal standards around intelligence, appearance, and status to determine whether a career is feasible for them. Trusted adults, academic experiences, peers, and even the media all have a major influence on identity formation—and they play a powerful role in either reinforcing or undercutting stereotypes and socioeconomic divisions.

In some cases, students in their formative years may be interested in a particular job role or career, pursue it for some time, and then change course due to personal and societal and institutional barriers including:

- **Experiences of being an "only."** An only is an employee who represents the sole person from an identity group, such as the only Black worker, only woman, or only LGBTQA worker.
- **Bias and stereotypes.** This entails the tendency, inclination, or prejudice toward or against something or someone. Biases are often based on stereotypes rather than actual knowledge of an individual or circumstance.
- **Impostor feelings.** Impostor syndrome is characterized as a person's belief that they are inadequate and incompetent despite evidence that indicates the individual is skilled and quite successful.



- **Economic realities.** These pertain to financial access and roadblocks to learning and work.

Understanding the importance of occupational identity, particularly for underrepresented talent, is important for employers that want to broaden their talent pools and reach new communities. For employers in highly specialized industries or with significantly low populations of gender-diverse or racially diverse staff, seeking to build occupational identity and then supporting students in developing core skills can be pivotal in building a talent pipeline prepared for ever-evolving workplaces.

National nonprofit organizations such as Opportunity Network and COOP Careers are changing the game for historically underrepresented talent by providing the open door to opportunities that can change the course of individuals' careers and economic mobility—but it all starts with building occupational identity.

"You can't be what you don't see." I vividly recall hearing those words from a Hampton University undergraduate student whom I met during the 2019 Forté Women of Color Undergraduate Leadership Program. She shared with me her challenge navigating an industry with

Students build their social capital and networks engaging one another and the resources within their reach to make a difference.

Connect your employees with community engagement opportunities, particularly those centered on education and workforce development. Given the fact that early-career professionals describe social impact as an important value in a career, employees can leverage volunteering and junior board service as opportunities to foster collaboration, build understanding, and amplify leadership in up-and-coming talent.

In addition, if your company offers an internship program, consider dedicating one day to showcase the company's commitment to the community by hosting a group volunteer project, ideally with a partner organization. Doing so will show an element of your employer brand and values while also providing an opportunity for interns to connect with employees, their colleagues, and the community in a meaningful way.

Audit your early-career programs (interns, graduates, etc.) to determine the demographic representation of the cohorts and then follow up with an analysis by job function. Are emerging women and people of color in high-growth or client-focused roles or in back-office administrative or operational positions? Be mindful of those details, and where possible consider more-robust, centered campus outreach earlier in the application process.

Lean into mentorship. Seek out opportunities for staff to mentor young talent. Train the mentors on best practice mentor relationships. To be most effective, mentors should have a desire to grow in their awareness and understanding of DEI.

Commit to foster an environment of belonging

Inclusive spaces don't just happen—with intention, companies create them. Many organizations spend significant efforts on recruitment, particularly when it comes to early-career recruitment. That's because such employers see an opportunity to help shape emerging professionals and diversify their population from the junior levels, which tends to be easier to do than with more-experienced hires.

Unfortunately, a focus and investment exclusively on recruitment with little thought around the environment needed to retain tal-

limited mentorship and lack of exposure to professionals in the space. "As a first-generation college student, I'm not quite sure how to break into the sector—what should I be doing?"

Employers that want to build a diverse talent pipeline must understand the breadth of student experiences and the growing disparities that exist within the US collegiate population. They also should understand that students begin developing networks in childhood through their parents and other significant adults (for example, teachers, coaches, and faith and community leaders). Those relationships, known as social capital, either propel student success or hinder success over time.

Therefore, employers must seek to support higher education institutions in building career-ready graduates through not only skill development but also access to opportunities that build social capital such as internships and mentorships. Employers have an opportunity to support career readiness through partnerships, advocacy, and philanthropic initiatives at a critical time when student career identities and preferences are being shaped. Here are other action steps to build occupational identity.

Ensure your early-career talent strategy includes some element of industry or sector education and mentorship. Consider opportunities to showcase "a day in the life" or sponsor competitions that support student skill development for your sector or industry. For example, Gucci Changemakers in partnership with the Thurgood Marshall College Fund seeks to empower innovators and entrepreneurs attending historically Black colleges and universities to form a team and develop solutions to social, educational, and economic problems facing the communities surrounding their college or university. Participants pitch their ideas to a panel of expert judges who serve as informal mentors and coaches.

A focus and investment exclusively on recruitment with little thought around the environment needed to retain talent often hampers efforts.

ent often hampers efforts long term. Given differential generational preferences, the reality of COVID-19, and heightened conversations around racial and social justice, fostering belonging becomes critical for any organization that wants to truly live out DEI. According to Culture Amp's *6 Ways to Foster Belonging in the Workplace*, belonging is "the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group or place."

For early-career talent who in many ways are still shaping their futures and determining their next move, belonging becomes important in providing a sense of community. For most, particularly those who choose the college route, community is naturally part of the collegiate experience through activities such as athletics, sorority and fraternity life, industry-related clubs, and civic clubs.

To foster a sense of belonging for young professionals, employers should take inclusive and equitable actions through the talent sourcing, selection, and development stages. That includes ensuring factors such as inclusive language and communication; equitable pay (gender and race); robust training and development; culturally competent managers; and affinity spaces that value, celebrate, and advance opportunities for diverse communities.

Research from BetterUp's *The Value of Belonging at Work* study reveals that employees with a strong sense of belonging report a 56 percent higher level of overall job performance. If your organization has an established early-career talent strategy, it is important to first ensure the intention of that strategy and programming are clear to all stakeholders.

The strategy and programming ideally should support broader organizational key performance indicators around people and culture. KPIs that promote inclusion and belonging include:

- Number of internal resource groups and affinity groups and their overall level of satisfaction
- Retention figures (length of service)
- Employee satisfaction survey results (category of inclusion and belonging)
- Increase in referrals (particularly from underrepresented populations)

It is also critical for employers to know how early-career professionals experience the organization. Look to incorporate a continuous process of collecting employee feedback

through pulse surveys, focus groups, and interviews such as exit, stay (retention), and end-of-program surveys that seek to gather information on employees' experiences—the good, bad, and ugly. These are some topics to address in an employee pulse survey:

- Value for unique identity and experiences
- Manager-employee relationship
- Access to resources and training
- Support around career growth
- Satisfaction around reward (compensation)
- Clarity around how to advance and get promoted
- Perception of employer's commitment to DEI
- Perception of actions taken against the communicated goals

Collecting such feedback, communicating highlights back to employees, and then setting short- and long-term actionable steps becomes an essential step in building an employer brand that early-career talent find attractive and that they would recommend to a friend or peer.

Place values at the center

The 2021 *Gen Z Spotlight Report* found that 83 percent of Gen Z workers want to work for an organization where they can make a positive impact on the world, while 75 percent said they prioritized a workplace that values a healthy work-life balance.

During a focus group our team held, students shared how they sought employers who lead with values at the center addressing causes including sustainability, climate change, social justice, and wellness. Gen Z values authenticity and views it as a key factor in making initial decisions about joining an organization.

To center values in their early-career talent strategy, employers should consider the following actions.

Stand for something. In the talent attraction, sourcing, and selection stages, clearly and consistently articulate what the company stands for. Where possible, center employee voice and ensure underrepresented employees are also sharing their experiences. Such acts build on an employer's brand.

Audit the sourcing life cycle. Ensure all job descriptions, interview questions, interview evaluations, and interview panels center values and assess whether young professionals demonstrate those values. That will also show emerging talent that the values matter to the employer.

Reward behaviors that embody values. The early-career talent process should include opportunities to evaluate on the basis of culture and DEI. Ensure that future talent will be culture-additive, meaning they embrace values and live them out in their daily work and interactions. They also bring unique perspectives and experiences adding to the fabric of the organization.

Remix it: Talent development for emerging professionals

According to career resources site Zippia, Gen Z workers will leave a job sooner if there is a lack of advancement opportunities. For a generation of self-starters who seek out learning opportunities on their own, early-career professionals want to be challenged and want a guarantee that they'll be able to find success at organizations—on their own terms.

Given that the traditional career ladder is becoming a relic of the past, young talent seek opportunities where they can broaden their skill sets and be more entrepreneurial in their roles. To attract Gen Z workers, employers must demonstrate how they support a more fluid job structure.

Offer rotational experiences. The *Psychology Today* article “9 Things Gen Z Employees Want Post-Pandemic” reveals that 97 percent of Gen Zers prefer to have job opportunities outside of what they were originally hired for. Offer early-career workers an opportunity to build and demonstrate their skills in various capacities such as rotational or job-share experiences. As an example, GE, Allstate, and Goldman Sachs are well known for their rotational programs and have consistently been rated as employers of choice for early-career talent.

Center microlearning. Provide short, modified bits of information that users can easily access. Even though Gen Z talent grew up with smartphones, they still prefer in-person engagements. Consider hybrid learning opportunities, and offer diverse experiences for employees to learn new things through tutorials, quick guides, resource libraries, and virtual reality games.

Celebrate intrapreneurships. *Harvard Business Review* defines these as individuals acting like innovative entrepreneurs but within the ecosystem of a larger, more traditional organization. Employers must seek to create a culture where early-career talent can bring their entrepreneurial thinking and capabilities to fruition. That may be through organizational innovation competitions or through employee resource groups.

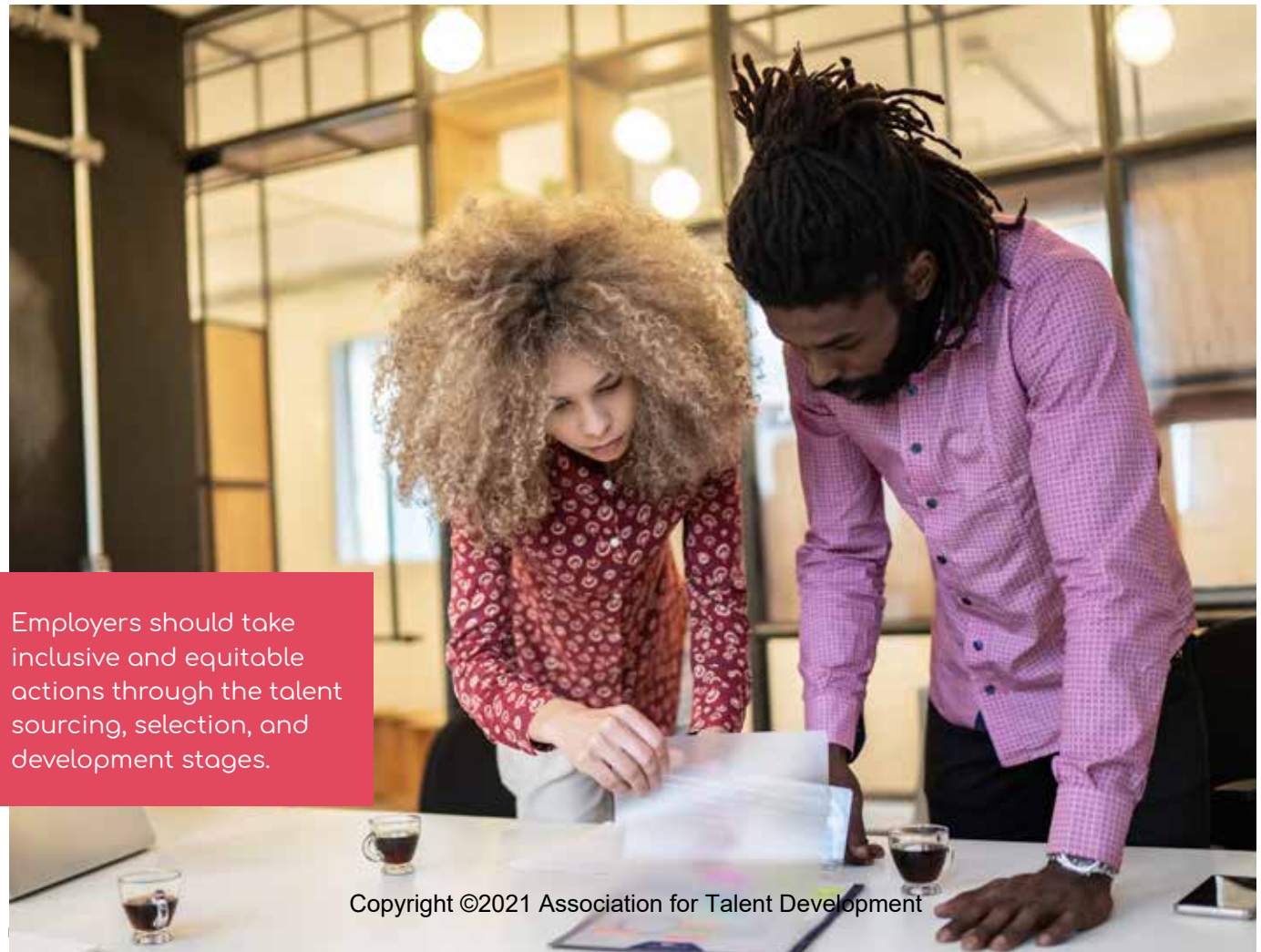
Reverse mentorships. Build a strong multigenerational organization using this approach. Reverse mentoring pairs younger employees with executive team members to serve as mentors to the more senior workers on

various strategic and culturally relevant topics. Some of the benefits of reverse mentorship include driving retention, promoting culture and belonging, fueling innovation and technology proficiency, and advancing diversity. The key to reverse mentorships comes down to conscious pairing, clear communications and guardrails, and providing tools for success (such as training and development, an initiative lead, and a formal kickoff program).

Build the pipeline

Now is an exciting time for organizations that want to truly stand out among the pack. They have an opportunity to reconsider possibilities and implement fresh policies, programs, and practices that will ultimately build human capital and propel business opportunity.

Chelsea C. Williams is founder and CEO of College Code; chelseawilliams@collegecodellc.com.



Employers should take inclusive and equitable actions through the talent sourcing, selection, and development stages.



SUBSCRIBE TODAY!



INTERESTED IN SUBSCRIBING TO *TD* MAGAZINE?

RATES

\$150

Individual Domestic (United States)

\$331

Institutional Domestic (United States)

\$249

Individual International

\$430

Institutional International

To subscribe, go to www.td.org/tdsub.

Get even more when you become a member of ATD!

All ATD memberships include a monthly subscription* to *TD* magazine, plus access to Watch & Learn webcasts, digital publications, research, discounts on conferences, and much more.

For details about ATD membership, visit www.td.org/members.

*International members outside the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico receive the digital *TD* magazine as part of their membership.



Association for
Talent Development