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# Considering Who has Opportunities for Training and Advancement

21CLEO Research Team

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# Considering Who has Opportunities for Training and Advancement

by 21CLEO Research Team | Nov 1, 2021 | 21 CLEO, Announcements



A goal of our research is to understand characteristics of employer-supported learning that may lead to advancement. In our work to date, we have come to understand that it is not necessarily the existence of educational opportunities that matter, but instead whether or not learners are recruited to participate, supported through their engagement, and shown how their skills can be leveraged for advancement.

The different learners we interviewed had very different stories to share about whether or not they were invited to engage in learning that ultimately led to advancement. Our data has suggested that the level of engagement from direct supervisors, managers, or human resource professionals at their workplace makes a difference. These stakeholders hold positions of power and can determine whether or not the learners are identified as workers who are ‘ready for’ training and advancement. This has led us to wonder how learners signal they are “ready” or “a good fit” and how managers, supervisors, or other mediators of such opportunities notice them.

The three working learners featured in this blog post represent contrasting experiences that help us to understand the level and quality of support from such mediators as has become evident in our research, and the results on the careers of these learners. All names used are pseudonyms.

### Ijakoo: Sought-Out Opportunity Elsewhere

- Immigrant from Eritrea; multilingual; home language not English
- Higher education degree and work as a financial sector professional in Eritrea
- Single mother of young children
- Stretched by long commute, pre-dawn shift start, & two jobs
- Technologically-curious problem solver



### Advancement History

- Employer referred her to workplace ESOL class at a large regional airport
- Received no proactive guidance for advancement, nor credentialing opportunities
- Stuck in two dead-end frontline service jobs at the airport

### **To What End?**

- Left employment at the airport; new employer offers better schedule
- Sought out a workforce development opportunity provided by a CBO
- Studying for tech support certification, course paid for by CBO
- Once certified, can work from home

*I like to find a problems and solve things.... If I follow my hobbies, it's better. For my family, I have gifts. Like I said because i'm single mom, so I just want to do my own thing on my schedule.*

### **Muhazzin: Supportive Supervisor Facilitates Advancement**

- Immigrant from Pakistan
- Higher education degree in home (MBA)
- Taxation and Finance professional in home country
- Multilingual; home language not English, but learned English in elementary school
- Divorced; left career & moved to US to stay close to children
- Assists parents who do not speak English



## Advancement History

- Workplace ed opportunities (supervisory program)
- Proactive guidance and supports from supportive supervisor
- Career advancement steps made clear

## To What End?

- Promoted
- Viewed as a key play and leader on team

*My supervisor, he helped me a lot....he gave me a lot of internal material to understand the work what I am assigned to....actually I submitted my project on those information what he provided me." My supervisor said "I will help you out... I will call your name on every meeting and let you talk about different issues like just normal routine issues, so your hesitation or maybe your communication is better.*

## Destiny: Different Supervisors – Different Experiences

- African American woman
- Some college courses but no degree
- Regularly participates in learning to improve her skills
- No family caregiving responsibilities



## Advancement History

- Worked in hospitality for two years
- Tapped for supervisor position by manager James



- Manager James provided mentorship and on-the-job training until his position was eliminated
- General Manager Bob did not think she was ready and worked against her success

### **To What End?**

- Was not given title to match responsibilities
- Was not given a raise when the rest of the department was
- Left the job and employer

*I feel very proud of myself ... I was able to get the position and they saw something in me ... and [Manager James] put enough trust in into me to know that I would be able to handle the position because it was really tough as a lot of responsibility. And with [General Manager Bob], I felt discouraged and like a burden, you know, not an asset. ... a lot of strikes per se that were against me. I'm black. I'm female and I was overweight. So, I think all those things had something to do, with how [General Manager Bob] felt about me.*

These three contrasting working learners' experiences indicate that there is no simple route from training to advancement. The presence of individuals who played a mediating role appears to have an impact on whether or not an individual gets tapped for training or learning opportunities, and what those learning opportunities may lead to next. Mediators, many of whom are supervisors in our data, can shape educational participation in training, and these opportunities can serve as a bridge or a barrier to working learner advancement.

On one hand, supportive mediators might take a proactive approach to move a frontline worker along a career path. Like

Muzzahin's supervisor, who did not dismiss Muzzahin's potential because of his language proficiency, they see 'assets' where others might see limitations or may just not 'see' a worker. On the other hand, Ikajoo was not given any credentialing or advancement opportunities and Destiny was led to feel "like a burden...a lot of strikes per se that were against me."

We are not alone in noting that the quality of supervision is a key element of worker satisfaction and access to advancement. The Aspen Institute's Jaime Fall, writing for Upskill America in [Upskilling Done Right](#), touches on the importance of evaluating manager performance based on their successful "development" of employees and "reward for those who do a good job". The first hand experiences of working learners suggests that the active role supervisors and managers play in encouraging participation in learning makes a difference. Furthermore, learners benefit when these mediators thoughtfully and holistically consider workers' past experiences.

We offer the questions that follow, organized by factors that play into advancement, to help supervisors, educators, and other mediators of worker learning to consider as they work to maximize access to and benefit of the learning opportunities they provide.

### **Working Learners**

1. What assets did each learner bring to the workplace that might be drawn on to assist in their advancement?
2. Who typically makes decisions about what an "asset" is in a workplace?

### **Opportunities**

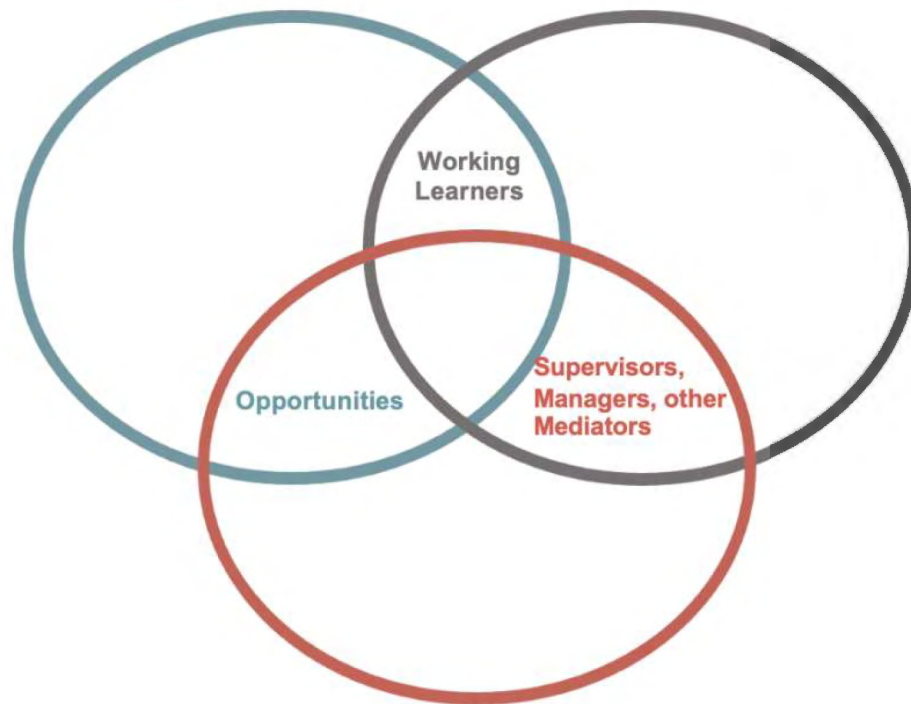
1. What access did the learner have to opportunities for advancement?

2. Who typically makes decisions about this in a workplace?

### **Mediators of Opportunity, Training, and Advancement**

1. What opportunities for mentoring (or other supports) were provided? What sort of supports were helpful?

2. Who has access to them and who does not? Who decides who gets access? How are those decisions made and who initiates, the learners or their employer?



Ideally, the answers to these questions nudge those who create education, training, and advancement opportunities to the intersection of these three factors.