INCLUSION FOR YOUNGER COLLEAGUES: OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

As part of an online project exploring Inclusion for Younger Colleagues, we gathered our Changemakers together for a session called 'Opportunities for Change'. We asked them to create small group presentations on the following questions:

1. Young people are entering the industry with anxiety about the viability of careers in the arts. **How could our recruitment practices respond to this and help them feel confident and positive about applying for a role?**

2. Employees of all generations have experienced difficulties since 2020, but young people have faced specific challenges during important developmental years. **How can we enable our entire workforce to play a positive role in the first stages of their young colleagues' careers?**

3. The increased needs of young people are placing additional pressure on our already stretched organisations. **How could we work together, or share our expertise and resources to alleviate shared challenges?**

This follow-on resource was then created to capture the value of those presentations. It brings together the insights, ideas, and practical suggestions shared by our Changemakers, offering a springboard for continued reflection and action. We hope it serves as both a record of the session and a catalyst for meaningful change across the sector.

Tonic Changemakers is a community of likeminded people who are committed to driving EDI-related change in the arts and cultural sector. It has been created so that you can share ideas, spark off one another and have companions on the journey.

It is also a first-of-its-kind hub of training, support and professional development opportunities designed specifically for EDI changemakers. All of it is based on the insights from Tonic's 10+ years of ground-breaking work with hundreds of arts organisations, supporting them to achieve tangible, long-lasting EDI-related change.

Question 1

Young people are entering the industry with anxiety about the viability of careers in the arts. **How could our recruitment practices respond to this and help them feel confident and positive about applying for a role?**

Pitfalls / Risks to be Alert To

Financial and Career Security Concerns
Financial insecurity is a major concern for young people considering careers in the arts.

Recruitment Criteria
Rigid criteria may exclude talented candidates, especially those affected by systemic or circumstantial barriers (e.g. COVID disruptions).

Impact of Covid-19
Long-term impact of the pandemic on young people's opportunities and readiness for arts careers.

Lack of Engagement and Understanding of Youth
Organisations may not have the internal understanding or relationships needed to engage young people effectively.

Communication and Voice
Tension between fair recruitment processes and enabling authentic self-expression by young candidates, and avoiding AI applications.

Managing Expectations vs. Reality
The tension between being honest about the challenges of arts careers while also offering hope and encouragement.

Definition of 'Young People'
Do we need to rethink age-based definitions to ensure inclusivity and relevance to diverse life paths?

Organisational Capacity and Resources
The limitations and strain on organisational resources when aiming for inclusive and supportive recruitment. Especially with a large scale of applicants.

Possible Opportunities to Take Advantage of

Rethinking Definitions and Inclusivity
Opportunity to update outdated age-based definitions to reflect more diverse career trajectories and life stages.

Recruitment Transparency and Accessibility
Opportunity to increase transparency and reduce financial and informational barriers to entry.

Staff Development and Organisational Culture
Opportunity to build internal understanding and supportive environments to better engage and retain young talent.

Feedback and Follow-up
Opportunity to create long-term engagement pipelines with candidates, using feedback and future opportunities to build loyalty and confidence.

Outreach and Sector-Wide Collaboration
Opportunity to leverage partnerships, sector-wide dialogue, and proactive outreach (like career days) to broaden access and improve understanding of arts careers.

Solutions & Suggestions

Low-Resource, Quick Wins

These are practical interventions that organisations can implement with minimal financial or staffing burden, directly addressing concerns around inclusivity, clarity, and accessibility in recruitment.

- **Clarify financial support structures upfront:** Clearly communicate the financial benefits of roles (e.g., pensions, relocation support, interview expenses) to address concerns about financial insecurity, a key anxiety for young applicants.

- **Distinguish between essential and desirable criteria:** Review job descriptions to differentiate more carefully between what is truly essential and what is aspirational. This lowers perceived barriers and encourages a broader pool of applicants—especially important given disrupted career paths during COVID. Include messaging that reassures candidates they don't need to meet every single criterion to apply, responding to the risk of under-confidence and self-exclusion.

- **Provide guidance for cover letters:** Offer questions or guidelines which encourage authentic expression in relation to the role, rather than a copied and pasted cover letter.

- **Allow alternative formats (e.g. video submissions):** Where feasible, enable applications via video to support different communication styles—though potentially more complex, this begins to redress accessibility gaps.

More Complex Suggestions

These require more planning and coordination but can significantly enhance engagement and transparency while building trust and long-term interest in arts sector careers.

- **Host Career or Insight Days:** Facilitate informal, low-pressure opportunities for potential applicants to engage with your organisation. These help demystify the sector and align with the goal of fostering confidence without overpromising outcomes.

- **Share case studies of career progression:** Showcase diverse pathways into and through the arts sector to combat the perception that success is linear or unattainable, particularly for those entering post-COVID.

- **Create feedback and follow-up processes:** Develop systems that notify unsuccessful candidates about future roles or provide basic feedback. This builds a talent pipeline and signals a longer-term investment in individuals.

- **Commission and mentor youth-led work:** Provide opportunities for young people to produce creative work within structured mentorship schemes. This helps bridge the gap between training and professional experience while supporting organisational understanding of young voices.

- **Offer training and volunteering routes:** Promote structured entry points for those looking to build skills and gain access to networks, especially helpful for organisations struggling with how to "know and include" young people.

Ambitious, Blue-Sky Thinking

These ideas are visionary in scale and long-term in impact. They address systemic issues such as equity, collaboration, and sustainability of talent pipelines.

- **Establish cross-organisational recruitment networks:** Develop collaborative recruitment partnerships across organisations or regions to reduce duplication, share knowledge, and broaden reach—especially helpful in addressing sector-wide talent shortages.

- **Invest in a dedicated recruitment and HR function:** For larger organisations a centralised team could manage high volumes of applicants, offer feedback, and gather data to inform future recruitment. This helps tackle the organisational capacity risks identified earlier.

- **Expand national development schemes:** Build on models like CLORE or the Regional Director Scheme by offering long-term placements for early-career professionals across a diversity of organisations. This kind of structured progression pathway could radically improve confidence and sector retention.

- **Re-evaluate the definition of 'young people':** Consider more flexible and inclusive age criteria that reflect real-world career disruptions and diverse life trajectories, particularly in the wake of COVID's impacts on early career development.

Further Provocations

What does "early career" or "emerging artist" really mean?
Should these terms continue to be defined primarily by age, or is there a more nuanced, experience-based approach that better reflects the diversity of pathways into the arts?

What can we learn from innovative models of inclusion?
How might we adopt or adapt the strategies used by organisations such as Maya Productions – Inclusion Boost or the Young Vic Creators Program to strengthen our own practices and build long-term engagement with young people?

Is transparency around application volume helpful or harmful?
Would sharing the scale of competition with applicants provide useful context and help manage expectations, or could it unintentionally discourage participation from those who already feel unsure about their chances?

Question 2

Employees of all generations have experienced difficulties since 2020, but young people have faced specific challenges during important developmental years. **How can we enable our entire workforce to play a positive role in the first stages of their young colleagues' careers?**

Pitfalls / Risks to be Alert To

Fear of Rapid Change
Young people's adaptability may unintentionally spark anxiety about constant change within the organisation.

Inter-generational Resentment
Focusing on developing younger colleagues may leave older employees feeling vulnerable or insecure.

'Earn Your Stripes' Mindset
An ingrained belief that young colleagues must prove themselves before being taken seriously or respected by older colleagues can hinder early development.

Stereotyping Capability
Age-related assumptions can lead to mistrust of younger employees' skills and potential.

Outdated Career Pathways
Traditional career structures may no longer align with the evolving economic and social realities faced by young people.

Social Stigmas
Social assumptions about intergenerational workplace dynamics can discourage investment in young talent.

Dependence on the Virtual World
Limited face-to-face interaction risks weakening young employees' confidence, networks, and integration.

Possible Opportunities to Take Advantage of

Cross-Generational Learning
Opportunity to harness differences in skills and experience through reciprocal learning, enabling mutual development and reducing hierarchical barriers.

Youth Representation in Decision-Making
Opportunity to bring younger perspectives into organisational processes by involving them in panels, committees, and working groups.

Audience Insight and Cultural Relevance
Opportunity to draw on young colleagues' lived experiences to refine the organisation's image and better engage with current and future audiences.

Solutions & Suggestions

Low-Resource, Quick Wins

These actions require minimal time or budget but can begin shifting culture and unlocking generational collaboration.

- **Introduce a Planned Q&A / Buddy System:** Enable younger employees to engage in informal conversations with colleagues outside of their direct teams, to hear about different career journeys.

- **Embed Youth Voices in Existing Structures:** Involve younger colleagues in current panels, working groups, and committees to embed youth representation without creating new processes.

- **Acknowledge Young Talent Early:** Encourage managers to recognise that young employees were hired for a reason, and allow them to apply their full range of skills and experiences.

More Complex Suggestions

These require more planning, commitment or budget, but can deliver stronger long-term outcomes for the organisation and its workforce.

- **Utilising Training and Workshops:** Training which helps leadership and management develop their skills and approach when working with young colleagues. Workshops which build inter-generational harmony.

- **Initiate Two-Way Mentoring System:** For example, pair younger and older employees to attend different trainings, then debrief each other to exchange insights and flatten hierarchy.

- **Formalise Buddy System:** Integrate mentoring or buddy support into job descriptions and performance expectations, ensuring it's embedded across the organisation.

Ambitious, Blue-Sky Thinking

These ideas take a systemic, visionary approach and could transform culture across an organisation or sector.

- **Prioritise Mental Health and Reflective Space:** Introduce designated time for staff to reflect on wellbeing and discuss workplace challenges, potentially in collaboration with mental health professionals.

Further Provocations

What might change if we viewed mentoring and development not as a luxury, but as a core function of organisational health?
Investing in growth for all staff could shift perceptions that development is reserved for a select few — and foster a culture of shared progress.

Could retention challenges be less about generational commitment, and more about organisational investment?
Creating visible, tailored career journeys for young people may reveal that loyalty follows opportunity.

Are we fully aware of the untapped potential sitting in our own teams?
Many young colleagues are underutilised — yet they've been hired for their perspectives and capabilities. Are we giving them space to contribute meaningfully?

What long-held beliefs about age, experience, and respect might we need to unlearn?
Entrenched attitudes — from both older and younger colleagues — could be silently blocking collaboration and progress unless actively addressed.

Question 3

The increased needs of young people in the workforce are placing additional pressure on our already stretched organisations. **How could we work together, or share our expertise and resources to alleviate shared challenges?**

Pitfalls / Risks to be Alert To

Resource and Capacity Limitations
Organisations are already stretched. Collaborating effectively requires an honest understanding of capacity limits to avoid burnout and unrealistic expectations.

Finding Complementary Partners
Collaborations are most effective when partners share values and offer complementary strengths. Without alignment, efforts risk duplication or tension.

Tailoring Approaches to Individual Journeys
Individuals and teams are at different stages in their capacity and readiness for change. One-size-fits-all solutions may be ineffective or even counterproductive without adaptation to specific needs and contexts.

Risk of Disruption
New ways of working can unsettle established practices. Without careful planning, change may lead to confusion, resistance, or loss of morale.

Visibility of Struggles in Remote Work
Home-based or hybrid workers, particularly newer or younger staff, may struggle without being seen. It's easy to miss signs of disengagement or difficulty, and so monitoring and support in this area needs to be a priority.

Short-Term Thinking
Project-based funding or initiatives can lead to fragmented support. Young people need continuity and commitment to build trust and see real outcomes.

Possible Opportunities to Take Advantage of

Organisational Alignment and Shared Purpose
Opportunity to strengthen alignment within and across organisations by revisiting core values and long-term goals. The benefits of responding to young people's needs goes beyond the experience of younger colleagues, it can act as a unifying force, helping to clarify purpose and renew commitment to shared outcomes.

People-Centred Strengths
Opportunity to harness the relational strengths of a people-based sector. By sharing people-focused practices, organisations can build more empathetic, responsive systems of support rooted in trust and human connection.

Creative and Innovative Solutions

Opportunity to lean into the sector's creativity and passion to co-design bold, practical solutions. Collaborative problem-solving can unlock new ideas that are more agile, inclusive, and reflective of young people's realities.

Synergy Through Collaboration

Opportunity to create genuine synergy by working with partners who bring complementary perspectives and resources. When collaboration is values-driven, the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Positive Ripple Effects

Opportunity to realise unexpected benefits through deeper collaboration — from improved morale to sector-wide momentum. Shared success builds collective confidence and amplifies the impact of individual efforts.

Balancing Skill Sets

Opportunity to strengthen teams by pairing staff with complementary skills across or within organisations. This fosters mutual learning, distributes pressure more evenly, and enhances the quality of work delivered.

Investing in the Next Generation

Opportunity to invest in the long-term health of the sector by elevating young people now. Supporting their growth and leadership today lays a foundation for more inclusive, resilient organisations in the future.

Solutions & Suggestions

Although it can involve a certain level of work to create collaborations between organisations, cross-organisational working could be a highly effective way for work to support younger colleagues to be enacted. This is particularly the case for small or mid-scale organisations; if you have few staff and even fewer that are young, it can be hard to provide the community they may benefit from or a sense of internal progression for them. But working in combination with other organisations in your local area, or in your art form, could amplify your efforts. It could also lead to a more joined up talent pipeline by helping make progression routes between organisations (not just within one organisation) more visible to young people.

To make collaboration manageable and meaningful, it can help to focus efforts in a few key areas. Below are themed strategies to guide your approach, building on previous solutions and suggestions in this resource.

Community and Belonging

- **Act as connectors for young people:** Create opportunities for young people to meet others working in different organisations, either through informal networking events, structured sessions, or digital meetups. This responds to the risk of isolation or underexposure to professional contexts and leverages the sector's relational strengths.

- **Promote everyday wellbeing practices in combination with people from other local organisations:** Encourage simple, collective activities — like lunchtime walks or going to see work together — that normalise wellbeing in the workplace. These low-effort initiatives help address burnout and signal care, particularly important for hybrid or early-career workers. By doing this in a cross-organisational way, it can also help build a stronger sense of being part of an arts community for young people, not just a sense of being part of their own organisation.

- **Encourage informal mentoring and peer support cross organisationally:** Facilitate meaningful connections between individuals at different career stages across organisations. These light-touch, relationship-based supports can enhance wellbeing, confidence, and learning without the need for formal schemes.

Clarity and Visibility Around Progression

- **Collaborate with other organisations in making progression routes visible and transparent:** It can be challenging for small organisations with limited internal progression routes to achieve this by themselves. Work with other organisations to clarify how young people can grow in the sector more broadly, and highlight career pathways. This builds motivation and clarity, addressing concerns around stagnation or uncertainty in early careers.

- **Work together to establish formal mentoring pathways:** Develop structured mentoring programmes that clearly define expectations and support mechanisms. This provides consistency and ensures early-career professionals receive high-quality guidance, responding to the pitfalls around uneven or ad hoc support. By connecting with other organisations on this, you can diversify your pool of creative thinking, share best practice, and keep each other motivated and accountable.

Elevating Youth Voice and Leadership

- **Work together to include youth voice in strategic decision-making:** Work with other organisations to create and share mechanisms for young people to contribute meaningfully at a governance or leadership level — such as through youth boards, shadow trustee roles, or consultation groups. This helps shift perceptions from young people as beneficiaries to young people as co-creators.

Reimagining Culture and Organisational Norms

- **Explore new organisational models and share your learning:** Consider re-shaping traditional hierarchies to allow more participatory, collaborative decision-making — especially in response to younger generations' expectations of work. This aligns with the opportunity to rethink culture and deepen trust. Share learning with other organisations: there's no point in everyone individually inventing the wheel!

- **Adopt seventh-generation thinking through collaboration:** Embrace a mindset that prioritises long-term impact — asking not only what supports young people today, but how today's decisions will serve those who come next. This encourages deeper alignment across organisations and reframes collaboration as legacy-building, not short-term survival.

What might become possible if we embraced 'cathedral thinking'?
Could we adopt mindsets that extend beyond short-term pressures and individual projects —
building long-term, intergenerational structures that support not just today's young people, but
those who come next?

How can we shape technology to serve future creative lives, not diminish them?
As digital tools evolve rapidly, how might we work together to ensure they are used in ways that
enable, inspire, and sustain creative careers — rather than eroding the conditions they depend
on?