

# Ongoing Engagement with Train & Earn

ideas <sup>42</sup>



Staying in touch with young adults to help them achieve their career goals

**NMIC's Train & Earn program offers vocational and educational training to out-of-school teens and young adults to help them advance their skills and find work. After the five-week program, participants can receive a year of personalized support, guidance, and wrap-around services. However, most participants lose touch with the organization and miss out on these benefits. We worked with program administrators to apply a behavioral lens to the program and help participants take full advantage of the services offered.**

## Summary

The NMIC Train & Earn program in NYC provides out-of-school teens and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 with job readiness training (e.g., resume building, interview preparation, job search advice, and professional skills training), workforce training (e.g., certification in customer/food service, Microsoft Office), and career development through paid internships, job placement, or vocational training. All of the participants come from low-income households and have faced a barrier to employment, ranging from being a young parent, having limited education or job skills, or being involved in the justice system. The program consists of two phases: five weeks of intensive “core services” training and then a year of follow-up support in which participants can update staff on their progress and receive additional guidance as needed.

## Highlights

- ▶ NMIC's Train & Earn program focuses on job and career development for NYC youth between ages 16-24.
- ▶ Though the program has two phases, only about half of participants were engaging in the second phase.
- ▶ Email and text communications were designed to increase uptake of services and communications after the initial training.

Only about half of Train & Earn participants update NMIC program staff on their goals and where they land during the year-long second phase after completing the five-week core service component of the program. Furthermore, many Train & Earn alumni do not take advantage of the additional services NMIC offers in the year following the core program, such as education and career counseling, social events, and mental health services. This ongoing support can be valuable in helping alumni progress toward and achieve their goals—such as finding a new job or continuing their education or training—in the year after their program.

ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) worked with NMIC to help increase the number of Train & Earn participants who keep staff informed of their progress and outcomes (and are therefore more likely to be staying on track), and the number who take advantage of additional wrap-around services offered by NMIC. Since participants generally lose touch with program staff during the transition from core service to the year of follow-up support, we focused our efforts on understanding and mitigating behavioral barriers to sustained engagement during the transition period.

## Identifying behavioral barriers

To understand the reasons behind low rates of both progress reporting and uptake of wrap-around services, we conducted a diagnosis process that included visits to NMIC's office to speak with program staff. We also observed a Train & Earn social event, and spoke with participants who had completed core services and were in their follow-up year, including people with whom Train & Earn staff had lost touch. Finally, we reviewed a variety of NMIC communication materials such as their website, the program curriculum, and flyers and handouts for participants to understand what information was being provided and how the program components were described.

Through these activities, we found that the requirements to stay in touch and keep staff informed of goals and outcomes were not salient to Train & Earn participants. In their minds, Train & Earn ended after the five weeks of core program completion. Participants who were aware that the program had two phases didn't have a strong grasp of the benefits of staying in touch. Perhaps most noteworthy, few were aware of the additional services available to them after they finished the core component phase. Some participants held a flawed mental model of NMIC as a temp agency responsible for getting them a job. Lastly, the BDC team found that small administrative hassles, such as not knowing where to go for support or how to get in touch with staff, could lead participants to drop out after core service even if they intended to stay in touch.

To combat these behavioral barriers and improve take-up of services and engagement during the second phase of the program, we designed a series of email and text messages to be delivered to participants at key points in the first five weeks of the Train & Earn program. They included news and information about the program and its benefits, and made it easier for participants to take advantage of existing services that they may not have been aware of previously. The messages, which can be easily and automatically disseminated using online platforms, were specifically designed to address the behavioral barriers in five key ways:

1. Reduce ambiguity about the Train & Earn program and participant responsibilities.
2. Set participants up for success by encouraging them to focus on the goals they set early on in the program through a mental contrasting and implementation intentions exercise.
3. Endow a sense of progress toward those goals in the first five weeks through an infographic embedded in email text.
4. Familiarize participants with the experience of receiving communications from staff through timely, consistent reminders over the course of the core program.
5. Get participants in the habit of updating staff through the establishment of office hour sign-up and two-way texting early on in the process.

In addition to the messages, the BDC team provided other design recommendations to the NMIC team that could both make the purpose of the Train & Earn program clearer to prospective and current participants and improve the program's efficacy.

## Putting recommendations into practice .....

Train & Earn staff and NMIC’s Director of Career Services were eager to adopt the practical communications redesign and other recommendations from the BDC team. They plan to send the emails and text message package to the next Train & Earn cohort. NMIC has also adopted additional BDC recommendations:

1. Adapting emails and text package for use in other youth programs, such as Intern & Earn and Youth Build, as well as adult programs with similar engagement problems.
2. The follow-up phase of Train & Earn and NMIC staff liaison position are now called the ‘alumni phase’ and ‘alumni workforce solutions manager’ respectively, to endow participants with a sense of accomplishment as graduates of the program and instill a sense of being part of an ongoing community of Train & Earn participants.
3. The endowed progress infographic the BDC created for the email communications will be printed and displayed in the NMIC classroom.

## The path to increasing impact .....

Train & Earn creates promising pathways to higher education and employment for out-of-school and under-employed teens and young adults, enhancing opportunities for both social and economic advancement. The program’s (newly named) alumni phase provides valuable support and services to facilitate a smooth transition for core program participants into a stable, productive adult life.

The email and text communications we created are designed to increase participants’ engagement with NMIC staff and ensure that they receive the ongoing support they need to progress toward their goals. Behaviorally informed communications and programs are a cost-effective means to create stronger impact on people’s lives. This work is one of many examples of a successful collaboration between ideas42’s Behavioral Design Center and an NYC non-profit working to improve its own service delivery with an evidence-based approach, spreading the behavioral design approach to problem-solving farther.

*The work of the Behavioral Design Center is generously supported by The New York Community Trust and the Booth Ferris Foundation.*