

HATTAWAY COMMUNICATIONS

PATHWAYS & WORKFORCE FUNDER COLLABORATIVE

Helping Learners Navigate Their Futures

A Practical Communications Workbook

1. Understanding Learners Today

Young people are thinking seriously about their futures. They want careers that match their interests, provide financial stability, and offer opportunities to grow.

But making decisions about education and careers can feel daunting, especially when the world of work is changing and the options are difficult to compare.

Our 2026 national research reveals an important tension:

Young people have ambitions…	**…but navigating the future can be overwhelming.**
69% trust themselves to make good decisions about their futures.	**66%** say fear of making the wrong choice can keep them from moving forward.
68% have a clear picture of the kind of life they want.	**63%** often feel stuck or overwhelmed when thinking about their futures.

This changes how we should think about communications.

Our job isn't simply to persuade young people that education and training matter. It's to help them connect their ambitions to real opportunities, understand their options, and feel confident taking their next step.

That's where a strong narrative can make a difference.

2.The Power of Narrative

Facts and information are essential to helping people make decisions. But how we organize and communicate that information matters.

Behavioral science and research on storytelling show that people can find information easier to understand, remember, and share when it is connected through a meaningful narrative rather than presented as a collection of disconnected facts.

At Hattaway Communications, we use an audience-centered Narrative Framework to help organizations communicate in ways that connect with people's motivations and move them toward action.
The framework draws on five elements of a compelling story:

Element	The question it answers
People	Who is at the center of the story?
Goal	What do they want to achieve?
Problem	What's standing in their way?
Solution	What can help them overcome that challenge?
Call To Action	What can they do to move forward?

Make your audience the protagonist

One of the most important principles of the Narrative Framework is that **your audience—not your organization—is the protagonist of the story.**

For career education and training organizations, that means beginning with learners and the futures they want to build.

Your programs play an important role, but they enter the story as a way to help learners achieve their goals.

This shift matters. Instead of asking people to care about what your organization offers, you show them how those opportunities connect to something they already care about.

A shared narrative, adapted to your work

A Narrative Framework isn't a script to repeat word for word. It's a shared strategy for communicating consistently and persuasively.

It helps organizations across the pathways and workforce field reinforce common ideas while adapting their messages to different audiences, programs, channels, and communities.

You might emphasize different elements in a recruitment email, a program webpage, a social media post, or a conversation with a prospective learner. Together, those communications can tell a consistent story about what's possible and how to get there.

3. The Pathways Learner Narrative Framework

Drawing on national surveys, interviews, message testing, and conversations with learners and employers, we've developed a shared narrative for communicating with young people about education and career pathways.

Narrative element	Our shared narrative	What it means for communications
People 	**Ambitious People Ready for the Next Step**	Recognize learners' interests, ambitions, and ability to make decisions about their futures.
Goal 	**A Career That Fits—and a Future They Can Count On**	Lead with the careers and lives learners want to build, including meaningful work, stability, and opportunities to grow.
Problem 	**The Path Is Powerful—If You Know How to Navigate It**	Acknowledge that unfamiliar options, competing demands, and uncertainty can make decisions difficult. Help learners find and evaluate the information they need.
Solution 	**Career Education That Works—For Life**	Show how education and training provide practical skills, hands-on experience, and opportunities that can grow with learners over time.
Call to Action 	**Ready for What's Next? This Is Where You Start**	Give learners a clear, useful next step, whether they're exploring careers, comparing programs, seeking advice, or ready to enroll.

Together, these five elements tell a coherent story that begins with learners' ambitions, recognizes the decisions they face, and shows how education and training can help them build the futures they want.

4. One-Minute Message for Learners

Here's how the five elements come together in a message that speaks directly to young people.



People
You've got big plans for your future. You want to do work you enjoy, earn a good living, and build a life you're proud of.



Goal
And there are many ways to get there. Whether you're interested in healthcare, technology, the skilled trades, or something else entirely, you can find a career that fits your interests and gives you room to grow.



Problem
With so many education and training options, choosing your next step can feel like a big decision. You want to know where a path leads, what it takes to get there, and whether it's right for you.



Solution
Career education and training can help you move forward with confidence. Explore careers that interest you, learn what different programs offer, and hear from people who've taken those paths. You can gain hands-on experience, build practical skills, and open doors to new opportunities as your goals grow and change.



Call to Action
Your future starts with a next step. Find a path that fits your goals—and start making it happen.

Putting the message to work

The One-Minute Message demonstrates the narrative in action. Use it as a starting point for communicating about the people you serve, the futures they're working toward, and the opportunities you can help them explore.

5. Your Learner Narrative

Now, make the Narrative Framework your own.

Use the prompts below to identify how each element applies to your organization, the learners you serve, and the opportunities you provide.

Narrative Framework	Your Narrative
 **People: Ambitious People Ready for the Next Step** Who are the learners you serve? What are their interests, strengths, and ambitions?	
 **Goal: A Career That Fits—and a Future They Can Count On** What careers and futures are they working toward? What matters most to them?	
 **Problem: Career Education That Works—For Life** What questions, uncertainties, or barriers make it difficult for learners to understand or pursue their options?	
 **Solution: Ambitious People Ready for the Next Step** How does your organization help learners move forward? What skills, experiences, and opportunities can your programs provide?	
 **Call to Action: Ready for What's Next? This Is Where You Start** What's a specific, useful step learners can take to explore their options or get started?	

Turn your narrative into a message. Use your answers to develop a short message for your audience.

6. Make Pathways Easier to Navigate

Our latest research points to an important opportunity to strengthen communications about career pathways. Learners may be interested in an opportunity but unsure whether it's right for them, what it requires, or where it could lead.

The **PROBLEM** element of our narrative acknowledges this challenge. The **SOLUTION** and **CALL TO ACTION** help learners move past it.

Communications need to do more than make pathways appealing. They should help learners understand their options and make informed decisions.

What learners should be able to understand

Use this checklist to review program webpages, brochures, recruitment emails, and other communications.

- ☐ **What's available in my area?** Help learners find relevant local opportunities.
- ☐ **Where could they lead me?** Show potential careers, earnings, and employment outcomes.
- ☐ **Why might they fit me?** Describe the work and connect it to different interests and goals.
- ☐ **What will they require?** Explain eligibility, prerequisites, and commitments.
- ☐ **What will they cost?** Make tuition, fees, and financial assistance information easy to find.
- ☐ **How long will they take?** Explain program length and scheduling requirements.
- ☐ **Can I build on them?** Show how learners might continue their education or advance their careers.
- ☐ **What do people who've done them say?** Include firsthand experiences from learners, graduates, and workers.

Go beyond providing information

Make unfamiliar pathways understandable. Explain what an apprenticeship, credential, or training opportunity actually involves rather than assuming learners know the terminology.

Help learners evaluate their options. Organize information so learners can compare programs based on the factors that matter to their decisions, including cost, time, requirements, and outcomes.

Connect digital information with human guidance. Use websites, videos, and social media to help learners discover opportunities, then make it easy to connect with advisors, workers, and others who can answer questions.

Offer useful next steps. Not every learner is ready to enroll. Give them ways to explore a career, compare options, talk to someone, or check requirements before applying.

Review your communications

Choose one program webpage, recruitment email, or other resource.

What information can learners already find easily?

What's missing, unclear, or difficult to compare?

What could you change to make the next decision easier?

7. Strategic Stories: Bring the Narrative to Life

The Narrative Framework provides the structure of a compelling story. Strategic Stories show how that narrative plays out through real people and experiences.

Stories can help learners imagine themselves pursuing an unfamiliar pathway. They can also make the decision-making process more concrete by showing what someone considered, what they learned, and how they found their way.

The most useful stories don't simply celebrate a successful graduate. They show the journey.

The Strategic Stories Framework

Narrative Element	What to capture
People	Paint a vivid, relatable picture of the learner, including their interests and ambitions.
Goal	Show the future they want. What matters to them about their career and life?
Problem	Describe the decision they faced. What questions, concerns, or tradeoffs made it difficult?
Solution	Show what helped them move forward and what the experience was actually like. What did they learn, practice, or gain?
Call to Action	Show where the choice took them and what opportunities it opened up. What might another learner take from their experience?

Questions to help uncover a Strategic Story: Interview Guide

PEOPLE AND GOAL

- What were you interested in when you started thinking about your future?
- What kind of work and life were you hoping to build?

PROBLEM

- What options were you considering?
- What questions or concerns did you have?
- What was difficult to figure out?

SOLUTION

- How did you learn about the opportunity you chose?
- Who or what helped you make your decision?
- What was the experience like?
- What skills, connections, or opportunities did you gain?

CALL TO ACTION

- Where has this experience taken you?
- What are you working toward next?
- What would you encourage someone considering a similar path to explore?

Your Strategic Story

Use the framework to outline a story you could develop for your communications.

Narrative Element	Your Story
People:Who is the learner?	
Goal: What future did they want?	
Problem: What decision or challenge did they face?	
Solution: What helped them move forward, and what did they gain?	
Call to Action: Where did the path lead, and what could others learn?	

Make the story useful

Look for concrete details that help learners understand the journey: what the person considered, what the program required, what surprised them, who helped, and what happened afterward.

Where possible, pair the story with practical information about the pathway so interested learners can explore a similar opportunity.

Continue Putting the Research to Work

Use this workbook alongside the Pathways communications resources and training materials to strengthen how you communicate with learners and families.

Explore the Narrative Framework, research findings, and additional resources at **PathwaysLibrary.org**.

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