



REPORT OUT

Wraparound Supports, Untapped Talent, and the Conditions for Thriving

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On April 19 in Dallas, the SHRM Foundation, in partnership with Big Thought, convened a small, intentionally mixed group of leaders at Café Momentum for a dinner conversation on what it actually takes to help people not just access work, but thrive within it. The gathering was part of the SHRM Foundation’s **Tharseo Exchange** series, designed to bring leaders together for candid, solutions-oriented dialogue that generates big, bold ideas for the future of work.

Café Momentum is not simply a restaurant; it is a working model of what it looks like to wrap employment inside a broader system of care. Its purpose statement— “all youth deserve to dream” —is not rhetorical. It is operationalized through 24/7 support, mental health services, and a deep commitment to stability and healing. When Café Momentum first began its work, staff talked about consistency and structure, while the young people they served talked about something more fundamental: access to what they needed to live their lives. That gap between what systems think people need and what people need anchored much of the evening in various ways.

The dinner brought together employers, nonprofit leaders, educators, and workforce practitioners. While everyone gathered was, in many ways, working on the same problem, one repeated observation was that the full spectrum of these contributors rarely find themselves in the same room. Over the course of the conversations, a set of shared realizations about how incomplete our current systems are emerged, as well as a nuanced discussion of what would make them more coherent.

From Placement to Participation

A consistent thread across tables was a reframing of success itself. Much of the workforce system remains oriented toward *placement*—getting someone into a job. But participants repeatedly pointed out that placement is, at best, the starting point.

“People end up in difficult situations, sometimes, not by the choices they made but by the choices they were given.”

Thriving requires something more durable: *the ability to stay, grow, adapt, and navigate*. That, in turn, depends on a set of supports that extend well beyond the job itself—mental health, financial stability, coaching, and, perhaps most importantly, a sense of belonging and community. Several nonprofit leaders described models where support continues for one to two years after placement, helping individuals navigate basic workplace dynamics that are often assumed but not taught.

A simple example surfaced: understanding that you call in sick rather than simply not showing up. Not knowing these unspoken rules is not a deficit in character or capability. It is simple a gap in exposure and experience. If we design systems that end at placement, we should expect them to fail at retention and advancement.

Work as “Village” and the Centrality of the Manager

At its best, work can function as a kind of village. For many individuals (particularly those without strong external support systems), the workplace becomes the primary site of stability, feedback, and growth. But this is not an abstract organizational quality, nor one that exists without effort. Whether the village exists, and whether it is experienced as it should be, is mediated through authority—and particularly through the role of the manager.

“Having a village is so important; at its best, work can become the village.”

As one participant put it, “the company is the manager.” Culture, support, and opportunity are not experienced at the enterprise level; they are mediated through day-to-day supervision. This raises a structural challenge. Employers are

increasingly expected to function as part of the broader social infrastructure—detecting strain, supporting wellbeing, connecting individuals to resources—but managers are rarely trained or supported to do this work in a consistent way. The result is variability.

Thriving becomes dependent on the luck of having a good manager rather than the design of the system itself, which creates and reinforces disparate outcomes around what should, ideally, be a universal baseline: work as a stabilizing force. That function must be built intentionally, not left to discretion.

The Signal Problem: Skills, Translation, and Privilege

The labor market struggles not only to identify talent, but to translate it. Employers described difficulty clearly articulating what skills they need, often defaulting to proxies like degrees or years of experience. At the same time, individuals—particularly those from nontraditional backgrounds—said they struggled to articulate what they know and can do, and support organizations admitted concerns about whether they were equipped to fully assist.

The challenges of transparent, validated skills and competencies being clearly expressed and understood, while certainly a communication issue, is also a structural one. The ability to name and narrate one's skills is itself a learned and often privileged capability, typically developed through mentorship and exposure. The ability to own your abilities is one scaffolded by self-worth, value, and the embrace of community, family, and mentorship.

“Employers say they want resilient innovators, but what they actually want is someone who shows up on time and colors in the lines.”

Moreover, as imperfect humans, people who are hiring often have an easier time seeing (or assuming) certain skills and competencies when they are looking at a candidate who is, in various ways, similar to them—or who has gained key proxy statuses (a degree, a connection, a job title) that, for many, are not the path.

Several participants pointed to the potential for more explicit skills taxonomies or progression frameworks that could help employers define expectations more clearly and help individuals situate themselves along a continuum of capability. Others highlighted the value of embedding competency-based assessments directly into hiring processes—effectively allowing candidates to demonstrate capability rather than describe it. Underlying these ideas is a broader realization: the system is not short on talent; it is short on shared language, credible signals, and unbiased guideposts.

The Last Mile Problem

Even where systems are working, they often break at transition points. At one table, a Café Momentum ambassador told a story of successfully completing a cosmetology program but being unable to finish licensing requirements because the required hours to do so were unpaid. Without financial support, the ambassador was forced to delay completion and take on unrelated work to save money. The pathway existed, and the ambassador had progressed through it, but the final step remained inaccessible.

This pattern appeared in multiple forms and at various tables: training programs that end before individuals are fully integrated into careers, hiring practices that do not align with credentialing systems, and financial gaps that make otherwise viable transitions untenable. The takeaway is less about any single program and more about system design. Pathways are only as strong as their weakest transition point.

Untapped Talent and Uneven Access

There was little disagreement in the room about where untapped talent exists: justice-impacted individuals, opportunity youth, military spouses, caregivers, and others who sit outside traditional pipelines. What was more notable was the gap between recognition and activation.

Second-chance hiring provided one of the clearest examples of what it looks like when this gap is closed intentionally. The experience shared by one company illustrated that success in this space occurs only when the effort is designed, not incidental. Such effort requires alignment from

leadership, deliberate communication strategies, alternative signals of readiness, and clearly defined growth pathways.

Moreover, and unsurprisingly, multiple people in the room named that opportunity is not evenly distributed, and neither is the ability to recover from early misalignment. Many individuals never get the exposure needed to discover what they are capable of, while others are filtered out based on how they present rather than what they can do. And many who end up navigating challenging life paths struggle to have the skills and competencies developed in that journey recognized as legitimate, positive contributors to prospective work.

As one participant noted, “They need to know what it says about me as a person that I got here from there.” That sentiment captures both the potential and the failure of current systems to recognize growth, resilience, and lived experience as legitimate signals of capability.

Learning, Agency, and the Role of Early Experience

While the focus of the evening was on enabling success at work, dialogues also focused upstream, toward education and early exposure.

“Learning is about agency, but agency is a privilege that we don’t all get given equally.”

Participants noted a tension between the structure of formal education and the realities of work. Young people are often asked to choose paths too early, at a stage when identity and capability are still

forming, while the labor market itself increasingly rewards adaptability and lifelong learning. Education systems are attempting to respond to demands from the business sector of ten years ago, even as the current landscape is shifting aggressively over the course of months, not years.

At the same time, many early work experiences function less as career entry points and more as moments of discovery—places where individuals receive their first external validation of what they are capable of. Learning is not just about skill acquisition; it is about agency. And agency, like access and credibility, is unevenly distributed.

Programs that introduce play, experimentation, and real-world exposure—whether through arts-based models or career-connected learning models—were highlighted as ways to help individuals build confidence and identity alongside capability. They also were raised as ways of using hiring and even onboarding processes as ways of explicitly and implicitly assessing underlying competencies and aptitudes, divorced from where and how the candidate gained those competencies and aptitudes. One company, whose jobs were self-described as “extraordinarily tedious and detail-oriented,” crafted a deliberately difficult, hyper-detailed, and arcane application process to weed out competency-misaligned candidates at the start. Another, whose model was heavily based on performance and improvisation, required a 5-minute impromptu performance during the interview, less for the quality of the output than the willingness to “get silly.”

Sourcing, hiring, preparing, and nurturing people for jobs is, at its core, helping them develop and demonstrate the capacity to navigate and shape their own paths over time.

A System in Transition—and Out of Sync

Running through much of the conversation was a sense that both education and work are in the

middle of a transition, but they are not moving at the same pace and may not be transitioning in alignment with each other.

Education systems, in many cases, are beginning to shift toward more bespoke, personalized, skills-based, experiential models. Employers, by contrast, often remain anchored in more traditional, structured, communal, efficiency-driven approaches. In neither case is the goal to be contrarian—education systems are evolving to meet the needs of an individualized and hyper-technology-aligned generation, and employers are struggling to align such individualization with ongoing needs for collective work product, cultural alignment, and shareholder value. This creates friction. Employers say they want adaptability, resilience, and innovation, but often hire for predictability and conformity.

At the same time, external pressures—from technological change to generational expectations—are accelerating the need for alignment. As one framing suggested, this is a moment of “large ships turning,” but the turns are uneven.

Thriving as a Multi-Level Design Challenge

What ultimately ties these threads together is a broader framing of thriving itself. Thriving operates simultaneously at multiple levels—individual, organizational, and community—and those levels do not always align. For individuals, thriving is about dignity, agency, and stability. For organizations, it is about productivity and risk management. For communities, it is about mobility and cohesion.

The challenge is not to choose between these definitions, but to design systems where they reinforce rather than undermine one another. In practice, that means recognizing that workforce strategy is also social infrastructure.

Employment is not just an economic activity; it is a primary mechanism through which individuals find purpose, access healthcare, build relationships, and establish long-term stability. When those systems are misaligned, the result is not only inefficiency, but strain—both human and economic.

“They need to know what it says about me as a person that I got here from there.”

Looking Forward

The evening produced no unifying theory of success but did paint a clearer picture of the work ahead. There is broad alignment on the direction: expanding access to opportunity, recognizing talent more effectively, and building systems that support long-term participation rather than short-term placement. The gap lies in integration.

Employers, educators, nonprofits, and community organizations are each building pieces of the solution, but those pieces are not yet coherently connected. Bridging that gap—creating the connective tissue that allows these efforts to function as a system rather than a set of parallel interventions—remains the central challenge.

That said, with hope, there was an underlying drumbeat to remember that we are not starting from scratch, we are simply in a moment of fragmentation. There is opportunity in that, to move toward a more intentional, aligned system—one that makes it possible, in a more consistent and equitable way, for more people not just to access work, but to thrive within it.

Attendees

Isaac Agbeshie-Noye, Director, Foundation Programs, SHRM Foundation
Kristen Appleman, C-Suite & Executive Advisory, Currently seeking opportunities
Sara Beatty, Programs Specialist, SHRM Foundation
Nicole Belyna, Director, Talent, SHRM
Kerri Briggs, Executive Director, Educate Texas | Communities Foundation of Texas
Cathy Bryan, Manager, Foundation Relations, SHRM Foundation
Xiomy Buttermore, Senior Specialist, SHRM Foundation
Kendyl Baugh Moss, SVP-Southeast Region, TGR Foundation
Elizabeth Caudill McClain, Executive Director, Braven
Kristina Cola, Workforce and Opportunity Youth Initiatives, Big Thought
Olivia Cole, Chief Strategy Officer, Cafe Momentum
Andy Covell, HR Consultant, Lions Tech Solutions
Sandy Diaz-Haley, Fractional Marketing Communications Lead, Big Thought
Delight Deloney, Executive and Enterprise Relationship Director, SHRM Foundation
Aanaya Ennis, Ambassador, Cafe Momentum, Cafe Momentum
Luchiano Garcia-McMillian, Ambassador, Cafe Momentum, Cafe Momentum
Kelly Graham, Director, Thought Leadership, Year Up United
Amanda Hall, HR Business Partner, JBM Packaging
Bernadette Han, Head of Learning & Development Ops and Continuing Education, American Psychological Association
Porshia Haymon, Chief Program Officer, Cafe Momentum
Chad Houser, Founder CEO, Cafe Momentum
Robert Kent, Chief Philanthropy Officer, Communities Foundation of Texas
Elizabeth Kohm, Manager, Foundation Programs, SHRM Foundation
Danielle Lankford, Director, Corporate Impact, USAA
Jim Link, CHRO, SHRM
Clayton Lord, Senior Program Director, SHRM Foundation
Kelly Martin, Senior Vice President & Chief Human Resources Officer, Texas Health Resources
James McGee, President, Southern Dallas Progress CDC
Lynn McBee, CEO, Young Women's Prep Network
Tiffany Nicholson, Consultant, TEN Consulting
Erin Offord, President and CEO, Big Thought
Liza O'Connor, Executive Director - Texas, Per Scholas
Dustin Paschal, Managing Partner, Simon | Paschal PLLC
Adela Rodriguez, Ambassador, Cafe Momentum, Cafe Momentum
Wendi Safstrom, President, SHRM Foundation
Taylor Shead, CEO, Stemuli
Molly Stone, Senior Manager, The Artemis Agency
Ben Watsky, EVP, Whiteboard Advisors
Laura Ward, President/CEO, Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas
Melissa Walchko, Director, Total Rewards, SHRM
Stacy Winsett, Chief People Officer, RATP Dev USA
Yetunde Zannou, Managing Director, Dallas Works, All Stars Project