Jobs for the Future

FEBRUARY 2026

Advancing AI-Resilient Early-Career Pathways Request for Proposals (RFP)

This RFP seeks innovative, early-stage pilot projects that reimagine how early-career workers build skills, access quality jobs, and navigate an AI-transformed labor market.

Overview and Purpose of RFP

The Challenge

Artificial intelligence (AI) is fundamentally changing how people enter the workforce and advance in their careers. While AI can create more productive, meaningful work, it risks widening economic divides by displacing jobs and closing off entry points to stable careers. A growing body of evidence points to early-career workers* as the most exposed to AI displacement, as they disproportionately occupy entry-level, routine-task roles most vulnerable to automation. According to Stanford Digital Economy Lab's *Canaries in the Coal Mine?* study, within the first years of generative AI's widespread adoption, early-career workers in the most AI-exposed occupations have experienced a 13% relative decline in employment.[i] Jobs for the Future (JFF)'s soon-to-be-published survey data, fielded by AudienceNet in November 2025, shows that early-career workers are more likely to say that it is more difficult to get a job because of AI (35% vs. 25%) and are more likely to have changed or are considering changing their career plans in the near future (38% vs. 18%). And while the data-driven picture is still emerging as AI developments accelerate, inaction isn't an option. We are in a critical window for intervention to ensure early-career workers have a solid

* For the purposes of this RFP, the term early-career workers refers to individuals who are between the ages of 18 to 24 or in the first three years of a particular career or occupational pathway. This may include individuals transitioning from education into work, entering a new field, or beginning a new career pathway.

The Opportunity

To respond to this urgent moment of transformation, JFF is launching the **Advancing AI-Resilient Early-Career Pathways Initiative**, a national effort to identify, pilot, and learn from innovative models that support early-career workers in an AI-driven labor market. The initiative is grounded in JFF's belief that AI should make us all better off: AI technologies should lead to the creation of quality jobs and ensure access to those jobs, particularly for workers from populations facing barriers to advancement.[ii] If this vision is realized, early-career workers will be able to confidently navigate an AI-integrated workplace and access clear pathways to career advancement; employers and education and training providers will invest in developing early-career workers' human capabilities alongside AI adoption; and workforce and education systems will be set up to rapidly adapt to technological change.

To achieve this vision, JFF is sourcing innovative ideas and solutions that can be piloted and scaled, ultimately contributing to a workforce and education ecosystem that prepares early-career workers for sustainable, high-quality jobs in an AI-transformed economy. It's critical that we both gather more data on the emerging impact of AI on early-career workers and, in parallel, learn by doing—developing a body of early, action-based evidence on interventions that support early-career workers in this dynamic moment.

Areas of Interest

JFF is seeking pilot solutions that address one or more of three interconnected intervention areas that together reflect critical leverage points for strengthening early-career pathways. Through the application process outlined below, applicants must select a primary intervention area that best aligns with their proposed solution.

Intervention Area 1: Reimagining Work-Based Learning

The Challenge	In an AI-transformed labor market, employers are increasingly valuing workers with experience and expertise while reducing entry-level roles that allow early-career workers to build skills and gain workplace experience.[iii] At the same time, other avenues for building experience through work-based learning opportunities remain difficult to scale, are unevenly distributed across sectors, and often are inaccessible to workers without strong professional networks or are from populations that face barriers to advancement. We're hearing strong demand from the workforce and education field for a wide array of creative models—even beyond the tried-and-true successes of apprenticeships and paid internships—that give jobseekers, employers, and the learn-to-work ecosystem alike more opportunities to structure work-based learning experiences that meaningfully prepare workers for the jobs of the future.

The Opportunity	How might we design new or reimagined work-based learning models that enable early-career workers to build experience and demonstrate value in AI-integrated workplaces?
What a Pilot Might Look Like *(Select Examples)*	• Create new approaches to work-based learning, such as models of varying lengths of time, in which learners engage at several different points in their career arc, or that diversely structure employer/postsecondary partnerships • Redesign apprenticeships, internships, or project-based opportunities to reflect AI-augmented workplaces, including skills passports or other verifiable, competency-based ways for early-career workers to demonstrate skills beyond traditional credentials • Develop work-based learning models tailored to small, medium-sized, or public-sector employers • Leverage AI tools or platforms to expand access to work-based learning experiences that have market value

Intervention Area 2: Employer Incentives and Business Value

The Challenge	Employers are critical to providing early-career pathways, yet many are reducing investments in entry-level roles amid economic uncertainty and rapid technological change. Without clear incentives, evidence, or infrastructure, AI adoption may further reduce employer investment in early-career talent.
The Opportunity	What incentives, tools, or models can help employers—from small businesses to large private or public sector organizations—adopt and sustain practices that improve early-career job quality and access in an AI-driven economy?
What a Pilot Might Look Like *(Select Examples)*	• Test employer-facing tools that demonstrate the ROI of investing in early-career talent in AI-enabled environments • Design shared or intermediary-led models that reduce costs or risks for employers to hire and retain early-career talent • Pilot financial, operational, or reputational incentives to retain and advance early-career talent • Explore models that support entrepreneurial, self-directed, or venture-based pathways, where individuals create value through new products, services, or AI-enabled business models, while still building durable skills and pathways to longer-term economic security

Intervention Area 3: Articulation and Assessment of Durable Skills

The Challenge	While many durable skills frameworks already exist, AI is changing what skills are most in-demand and what proficiency looks like in practice.[iv] [v] Emerging evidence suggests that employers increasingly value more specific, role- and context-dependent expressions of durable skills, creating a need for greater clarity and precision about what these skills look like in practice in AI-integrated workplaces.[vi]
The Opportunity	How might we better understand, surface, and communicate what durable skills look like in an AI-enabled labor market in a way that leads to positive employment outcomes?
What a Pilot Might Look Like *(Select Examples)*	• Explore new ways to assess durable skills application in AI-integrated work or learning environments • Test AI-enabled approaches that surface signals of durable skills proficiency from work artifacts or interactions • Pilot partnerships with employers that translate AI-era durable skills into hiring or advancement decisions • Build durable skills development and credentialing into training programs, specifically for AI-augmented roles • Redefine the frontier of durable skills in roles that involve human/AI collaboration

Cross-Cutting and Emergent Approaches

While pilot projects should generally align with one or more of the intervention areas above, JFF recognizes that some promising ideas may not fit neatly into a single category. We welcome innovative, cross-cutting, or emergent approaches that advance early-career opportunities in an AI-driven economy, including pilot projects that span multiple intervention areas or explore new levers not explicitly named here.

Applicants with such proposals should clearly and compellingly describe how their approach advances the goals of this initiative and identify the primary challenge or opportunity it seeks to address.

Eligibility and Partnerships

To address the multifaceted nature of supporting early-career workers, we encourage a wide range of organizations to apply. Eligible applicants may include, but are not limited to:

- Workforce development organizations
- Postsecondary education institutions
- Training providers
- Intermediaries or nonprofit organizations
- Employer-led entities, including corporate human resources or learning and development functions
- For-profit organizations, including early-stage companies or startups

JFF recognizes that innovation often emerges from new combinations of partners and perspectives. Applicants may apply as a single organization or as part of a partnership. Partnerships across sectors are strongly encouraged, particularly when they strengthen feasibility, relevance to workers and employers, or pathways to scale.

Applicants should clearly describe the roles, responsibilities, and contributions of all partners involved in the pilot project.

Grant Structure

- **Estimated award size:** $50,000 to $100,000 per grant; award size will vary depending on the winning pilot project's maturity
- **Number of awards:** We anticipate awarding three to six grants
- **Timeline for the grant:** April 2026–November 2026 (eight months)
- **Peer learning community:** As part of this cohort, grantees will engage in a peer learning community throughout the grant period, with structured, ongoing opportunities to exchange learned knowledge, troubleshoot challenges in real time, and collaboratively strengthen approaches.

How We'll Evaluate Your Application

Given the scope, timeline, and funding available for this opportunity, JFF recognizes that pilot projects may represent early-stage efforts rather than fully mature implementation initiatives. Reviewers will prioritize clarity of thinking, knowledge of the impact of AI on early-career workers, and learning potential over scale or completeness of execution.

Proposals will be reviewed holistically using four core evaluation pillars:

1. Innovation: The extent to which the pilot project presents a compelling, well-articulated idea that addresses a meaningful challenge facing early-career workers in an AI-driven economy.

Reviewers will consider:

- How clearly the problem or opportunity is defined and grounded in a real-world context
- The novelty or distinctiveness of the approach relative to existing efforts
- Alignment with one or more of the RFP's intervention areas (or a clearly articulated cross-cutting or emergent approach)
- The degree to which the proposal advances new ways of thinking about early-career pathways, job quality, or AI-integrated work

2. Operational Readiness: The readiness of the applicant team and partners to advance the pilot project within the grant period, with appropriate scope and ambition given available resources.

Reviewers will consider:

- The clarity and feasibility of the proposed activities, timeline, and milestones
- The maturity of the pilot project (e.g., concept-stage, early pilot, or adaptation of an existing approach)
- The roles, capacity, and expertise of key team members and partners to lead this effort centered on the impact of AI on early-career workers

3. Early-Career Impact: The potential of the pilot project to improve access to quality jobs for early-career workers and to address barriers to economic advancement faced by people in the first years of their career pathways, particularly for people facing barriers to economic advancement.*

Reviewers will consider:

- How clearly the proposal defines and centers early-career workers
- The relevance of the pilot project to job quality, access, career mobility, or skill development

4. Learning and Scaling Potential: The extent to which the pilot project is designed to generate actionable learning and present opportunities for scale and/or replication beyond the grant period.

Reviewers will consider:

- The clarity of the learning questions the project seeks to explore
- Plans for engaging early-career workers, employers, or other stakeholders in shaping and refining the work
- Approaches to reflection, adaptation, and documentation during the grant period
- The potential for insights to inform future practice, collaboration, or subsequent phases of work beyond the grant period

* JFF's North Star populations include people without 4-year degrees, women, people of color, and people with records of arrest, conviction, or incarceration.

Application Questions

1. Project Overview and Innovation

- Describe the challenge or opportunity facing early-career workers that your pilot project seeks to address. Why is this issue important in the context of an AI-driven economy? What is your pilot project, and what makes it additive to existing approaches?
- Please also indicate which intervention area(s) your proposal most closely aligns with.

2. Operational Readiness

- Outline your high-level milestones for the grant period. What do you expect to design, test, or learn by the end of the grant period? (Please note: a detailed implementation plan is not required.)
- Please briefly describe your team's relevant experience and knowledge in AI and/or early-career development. What perspectives or skills does your team bring to this work? If applicable, include the names and responsibilities of your partner organizations.

3. Early-Career Impact

- Who are the early-career workers your pilot project seeks to benefit? How does your pilot project aim to improve access, job quality, skill development, or career mobility in an AI-transformed economy?
- How will you assess whether your pilot project is making a difference for the early-career workers you aim to serve? What outcomes or indicators would show progress toward your goals?

4. Learning and Scaling Potential

- What are the key questions you hope to explore or learn through this pilot project? Please describe how you plan to capture and share measures of impact and/or lessons learned during or after the grant period.
- If your pilot is successful, how might you envision scaling it? What key resources or support would help make that possible?

Additional Information

Team Bios: Please include brief bios for key project staff and partners, highlighting relevant experience.

Budget Summary: Please submit a budget and a brief narrative describing how funds will be used.

Key Dates

- **RFP released:** February 6, 2026
- **Proposals due:** February 25, 2026
- **Awardee notifications:** March 11, 2026
- **Required in-person participation:** March 25, 2026*
- **Grantee peer learning community launch (virtual):** Early April 2026
- **Grant duration:** April 1, 2026–November 30, 2026

** Selected teams will be asked to participate in an in-person convening at Stanford University on March 25, 2026. Applicants should plan for at least one representative from their team to attend. Travel costs will be funded. Please place a hold on your calendar for March 25, 2026. Additional details will be shared with selected applicants*

Submission Instructions

Please submit your proposal to this **Google Form** by 11:59 p.m. PST on **February 25, 2026**.

For any questions about the application process, please contact **AdvanceAIearlycareers@jff.org**.

Endnotes

i Erik Brynjolfsson, Bharat Chandar, and Ruyu Chen. Canaries in the Coal Mine? Six Facts About the Recent Employment Effects of Artificial Intelligence (Stanford, CA: Stanford Digital Economy Lab, November 2025), https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/publications/canaries-in-the-coal-mine/.

ii "AI for Economic Opportunity and Advancement: A Call to Action," Jobs for the Future, accessed January 13, 2026, https://info.jff.org/ai-for-economic-opportunity-and-advancement.

iii Gad Levanon, Matt Sigelman, Mariano Mamertino, Mels de Zeeuw, and Gwynn Guilford, No Country for Young Grads: The Structural Forces That Are Reshaping Entry-Level Employment. (Bala Cynwd, PA: Burning Glass Institute, July 2025), https://www.burningglassinstitute.org/research/no-country-for-young-grads.

iv Educational Testing Service (ETS). Skills Progressions: Connecting Learning, Skills, and Opportunity. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2023. https://www.ets.org/pdfs/sff/skills-progressions.pdf

v Pathsmith. Durable Skills Framework: Starter Edition. 2025. https://www.pathsmith.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Pathsmith-Durable-Skills-Framework-STARTER-EDITION.pdf

vi Wharton AI & Analytics Initiative and Accenture, The Skills Mismatch Economy: Insights from the Wharton-Accenture Skills Index (Philadelphia, Dublin: January 2026), https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/2026-Wharton-Accenture-Report-FNL.pdf.

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