

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT IN THE NATIONAL FUND FOR WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS

By Colin Taylor January 2011



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The National Fund for Workforce Solutions
www.nfwsolutions.org

The *National Fund for Workforce Solutions* is an unprecedented national partnership testing new ways to address a critical problem: the large gap between the skills many workers have and the skills many employers need to compete. In 24 sites across the country, the National Fund works closely with employers and leaders from the public and nonprofit sectors to find solutions, testing how lessons learned from groundbreaking pilot projects in workforce development can be applied on a national scale. About 300 funders and 900 employers are part of this effort.

The fund's national investors provide seed money—\$23 million in commitments to date—to regions building local approaches to job training and career development. The investors also support a comprehensive evaluation of initiative activities taking place across the country, technical assistance for local partnerships, and a dynamic “national learning community” that helps those partnerships share best practices and solve problems together. The national investors are: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ford Foundation, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, The Hitachi Foundation, JPMorgan Chase and Co., the U.S. Department of Labor, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Microsoft Corporation, The Prudential Foundation, and The Walmart Foundation.

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Jobs for the Future develops, implements, and promotes new education and workforce strategies that help communities, states, and the nation compete in a global economy. In 200 communities in 41 states, JFF improves the pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers. Jobs for the Future is the implementation partner for the National Fund for Workforce Solutions.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The vision of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions is to improve employment outcomes for low-income, low-skilled jobseekers and incumbent workers by:

- Creating regional funding collaboratives dedicated to local, entrepreneurial, sectoral workforce development initiatives;
- Supporting and expanding workforce development partnerships among employers, training providers, and workers;
- Working with employers to build career pathways; and
- Streamlining local workforce development efforts.

The initiative draws its inspiration from pioneering organizations such as Project QUEST and from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jobs Initiative, which began in 1995 and demonstrated that a workforce partnership's ability to engage employers and meet their needs is central to the goal of placing and advancing workers in quality jobs (Giloth 2004). In addition, Investing in Workforce Intermediaries, a pilot project of several national foundations that supported workforce intermediaries in six sites, led directly to the National Fund for Workforce Solutions (National Fund for Workforce Solutions 2008).

In 2009, the National Fund's evaluation team released its baseline evaluation of the initiative. While evaluators found that all workforce partnerships supported by the National Fund implemented approaches geared toward employers and workers, they also identified differences across the workforce partnerships in the scope and degree of employer engagement. To gather more information about employer engagement efforts in the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, this report looks at one side of the equation: based on a series of interviews with the coordinators of workforce partnerships, it details how they identify and meet employer needs and what challenges they face in doing so.

KEY FINDINGS AND LESSONS

Interviews pointed to a number of lessons about employer engagement that may be useful to workforce partnership practitioners as well as to the national leaders, evaluators, and funding organizations that take part in the National Fund:

Workforce partnership coordinators make effective initial connections with employers through a variety of methods, depending on the local context and the targeted sectors.

These include one-on-one contacts, partnering with employer associations, and holding focus groups with local employers of the same industry sector. Whatever mode or personal style coordinators use, this networking is always customized to a targeted industry sector. In construction, for example, working through employer associations has proven effective because employers may have less time to engage in group meetings. On the other hand, coordinators have created and sustained relationships with health care and manufacturing employers by working directly with human resources offices and frontline managers and workers.

Resources limit the degree of employer engagement. Effective engagement is labor intensive. Coordinators must identify employer needs, particularly in terms of what is required to build valuable relationships with frontline managers and workers. Yet the coordinators encounter a number of obstacles, such as employer fear that participating in workforce partnerships bears high costs (both financial and non-financial). Moreover, coordinators must work with employers to forecast—and prepare to meet—future skill and labor needs. The economy has reduced job openings and opportunities for career advancement in many industries, especially in construction, manufacturing, and health care. Forecasting is a way for workforce partnerships to anticipate and plan for the ebbs and flows within a sector (Conway & Gerber 2009). This need will continue even when the economy stabilizes,

coordinators report, expecting a flood of retirements in the coming years.

Effective employer engagement is rooted in placing a priority on and demonstrating an ability to meet employer needs.

Workforce partnership coordinators have found that orienting their programming and resources toward meeting employer needs is the most effective way to build trust and cultivate productive relationships. The coordinators, who struggle to maintain employer engagement, suggest a number of ways to maintain employer participation:

- Involve frontline supervisors and workers in needs assessments.
- Target groups of employers for engagement.
- Partner with employer associations.
- Forecast emerging employer needs.
- Invest in data collection on employer outcomes to demonstrate the workforce partnership’s effectiveness and to guide decision making.
- Work with employers to demonstrate the community benefit of the workforce partnership and the employer’s role in it.
- Protect employers from public-sector “red tape” and paperwork requirements by fulfilling those requirements for them.
- Provide employers with information about training programs, schedules, and participants’ progress.
- Be explicit about what employers will be asked to contribute.

Incumbent worker training programs are difficult to implement.

In some sectors—health care and manufacturing, in particular—coordinators find that the opportunities and need for advancing incumbent workers remain strong despite the economic downturn. But the coordinators still experience a number of challenges in meeting employer needs, including workers’ basic skill deficits, employer reluctance to pay for worker training, and limited incentives for workers to participate. The economy has exacerbated each of these challenges.

The coordinators promote incumbent worker training in a number of ways, particularly in industry sectors that can capitalize on newfound public dollars, for example by:

- Providing employers with or identifying employer personnel to serve as career coaches or retention specialists; and
- Working with employers to integrate workplace and compensation incentives for incumbent worker training and pre-employment training, with certifications based on the competencies employers have emphasized in needs assessments (White & Gordon 2010).

Translating employer needs to training providers is difficult.

Working with training providers on meeting employer needs is essential to the dual-customer model. But this task requires painstaking efforts and leadership by employers, training providers, and workforce partnership coordinators to change the goals of education and training institutions. Coordinators can facilitate this process by hiring or consulting with individuals from the education and training community to help build trust and productive relationships with providers that have yet to adapt to the dual-customer model.

To continue providing valuable services for employer partners, workforce partnership coordinators must create strategies that respond to the new and changing economic reality of high unemployment and fewer jobs.

One workforce partnership coordinator said that “new services, new money . . . always gets their [employers’] attention and lets them know you are in partnership with them.” Some creative ways in which workforce partnership coordinators can adapt to current economic conditions include:

- Investing in career pathway certification programs that place a priority on flexibility in scheduling and requirements;
- Identifying subsidized employment opportunities that provide invaluable on-the-job training for workers and built-in screening processes for employers;
- Drawing on public resources to provide layoff-averting options for employers with bottom-line concerns; and
- Working with employers to identify cross-training opportunities and creating training programs that align with those opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

The vision of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions is to improve employment outcomes for low-income, low-skilled jobseekers and incumbent workers by:

- Creating regional funding collaboratives dedicated to local entrepreneurial, sectoral workforce development initiatives;
- Supporting and expanding workforce development partnerships among employers, training organizations, and workers;
- Building career pathways; and
- Streamlining local workforce development efforts.

With \$30 million in national investments to date, the National Fund has provided roughly one-fifth of the funding for 24 different local funding collaboratives around the country. Those organizations raise the bulk of their funding from local sources, then make grants either to organizations that lead workforce partnerships successful at placing and advancing workers or to entities—such as labor-management partnerships, community-based and nonprofit organizations, community and technical colleges, or even some employers—that lead nascent partnerships (Baran et al. 2009).

The initiative draws much of its inspiration from pioneering organizations such as Project QUEST and from the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative, which began in 1995 and demonstrated that a workforce partnership’s ability to engage employers and meet their needs is central to the goal of placing and advancing workers in quality jobs (Giloth 2004). In addition, Investing in Workforce Intermediaries, a pilot project of several national foundations that supported workforce intermediaries in six sites, led directly to the National Fund for Workforce Solutions (National Fund for Workforce Solutions 2008). These projects sought to serve both workers and employers; this shifted the workforce development field

away from the traditional model, which was focused solely on training workers without consulting employers (Osterman 2001).

CET, for example, conducted “continuous communication with business clients,” had “business-like activities in its own programs,” and incorporated the “employer mentality.” The workforce intermediaries sponsored by the Jobs Initiative targeted one or several industry sectors and gathered industry-specific knowledge about hiring needs, skills needs, and the economic conditions facing many firms in those sectors in order to build deep relationships with local employers (Giloth 2004). They also proved adept at targeting employers for partnerships. In interviews with employers with whom Jobs Initiative grantees built good relationships, researchers found that firm managers were committed to the values that were part of the Jobs Initiative’s mission (Taylor & Rubin 2005).

But what incentive did employers have to start a partnership with these workforce intermediary organizations? What services do intermediaries provide their employer customers? Part of the reason that the workforce intermediary model was successful for the Jobs Initiative is that employers were eager to work with programs that promised to provide them skilled and job-ready workers. Intermediaries were able to work with employers—especially smaller firms—that had limited human resources capacity to address critical skill needs, and, at the same time, these organizations could create job opportunities and career pathways for workers (Giloth 2004).

Successful relationships resulted when the intermediaries took on the responsibility of assessing the employers’ operational challenges, developing a response, implementing it, and then conducting a follow-up assessment (Taylor & Rubin 2005). This atmosphere of relatively high employer demand allowed workforce intermediaries the opportunity to work with

employers to place skilled and job-ready workers into quality jobs or to advance incumbent workers along career pathways. During 10 years of operation, the Jobs Initiative enrolled more than 17,000 people and placed 8,090 trainees in jobs (NFWS 2008). On the other hand, employers were dissatisfied in cases where intermediaries did not do a good job of screening applicants, particularly on “first impression” standards and work readiness.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As the implementation partner of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, a critical part of Jobs for the Future’s role is to identify and develop solutions to challenges facing each of the local sites and workforce partnership grantees. A national evaluation team engaged by JFF manages collection of data on outcomes for workforce partnerships, employers, and training participants. In 2009, evaluators released their baseline evaluation of the National Fund. While the National Fund’s workforce partnerships all reportedly follow the dual customer/workforce intermediary model embodied in earlier efforts like the Jobs Initiative, the authors of the baseline report found that there was variation across the partnerships’ lead organizations in the scope of employer engagement strategies and tactics.

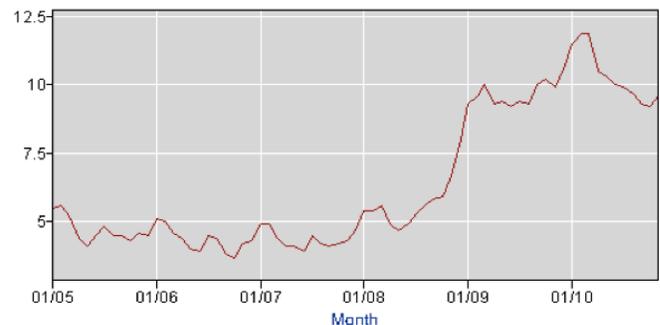
Some partnerships provided comprehensive services to employers, such as occupational training, organizing funding streams so that services for employers and workers can “span a continuous pipeline,” aggregating employer demand, researching labor markets and employer needs, and even advocating for policy changes that support worker advancement. Other workforce partnerships served employers in more limited ways, such as focusing on training service delivery.

The number of training participants served differed widely as well. Evaluators found that most workforce partnership leaders and coordinators saw employer engagement simply as a tactic that they could use to achieve their underlying goal of improving outcomes for low-income workers (Baran et al. 2009). They also reported that, even though 500 employers had been engaged in some way by existing partnerships, the depth and quality of engagement was unclear in many cases. Some workforce partnerships were struggling with how to understand the role of the workforce partnership in implementing the functions of a workforce intermediary; others questioned “the extent to which an initiative like this can and should engage employers in their own self-interest as opposed to engaging them primarily in the interest of serving low-income individuals” (Baran et al. 2009). A more detailed examination of engagement strategies, tactics, and outcomes would provide a better assessment of the different approaches and models implemented by workforce partnership leaders.

Moreover, because of current economic constraints, many employers once motivated by labor and skill shortages now struggle to maintain their current workforces and have less time and money to invest in engaging with workforce partnerships. As a result, jobseekers now outnumber openings six to one. In 2009, Thomas A. Kochan, a labor economist at MIT, wrote in the *New York Times*, “There’s too much uncertainty out there. There’s not going to be an upsurge in job openings for quite a while, not until employers feel confident the economy is really growing” (Goodman 2009a). Low-skilled workers now compete against an array of laid off skilled workers for the same jobs and limited number of slots at training programs affiliated with the workforce partnerships (Giloith 2009). Figures 1 and 2, with graphs of national unemployment rates among the populations targeted by workforce partnerships—individuals who have only earned a high school diploma—illustrate how severely the hiring of those workers has been affected by economic decline.

FIGURE 1

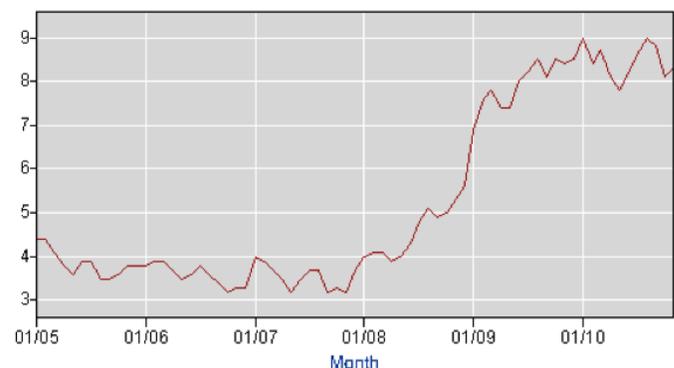
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (UNADJUSTED) FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA AND NO COLLEGE EDUCATION, AGE 25+, JANUARY 2005–NOVEMBER 2010



Source: Current Employment Survey

FIGURE 2

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (UNADJUSTED) FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH SOME COLLEGE OR AN ASSOCIATE’S DEGREE, AGE 25+, JANUARY 2005–NOVEMBER 2010



Source: Current Employment Survey

The uncertainty expressed by workforce partnership leaders about how best to engage employers, coupled with new constraints that the economy has placed on firms, raises questions for all leaders involved with the National Fund. It is important to understand in more detail how workforce partnerships currently engage employers and the variety of engagement strategies employed across the various industry sectors. It is also important to put these strategies in context by considering the challenges workforce partnerships face in terms of engaging employers—not just to place workers but also to identify firms’ hiring and incumbent-worker advancement needs and opportunities. Best-practice solutions can then be derived from an analysis of workforce partnership coordinators’ experiences. To that end, the remainder of this report helps JFF and the National Fund answer the following research questions:

- How are workforce partnerships engaging employers to identify their hiring and training needs?
- What are the primary barriers that the workforce partnerships funded by the National Fund for Workforce Solutions face when working with employers to place trained workers and/or to advance incumbent workers along career pathways and how are they addressing these barriers?

The goal of these questions is to understand:

- How workforce partnerships engage and connect with employers and how workforce partnership coordinators sustain strong employer participation;
- The challenges and barriers that workforce partnerships face in terms of engaging employers and sustaining their participation and satisfaction;
- The ways in which answers to the first question differ by industry sectors, local labor market contexts, and local workforce development systems; and
- Other ways in which workforce partnerships could engage and work with employers and non-employer partners to begin and sustain effective workforce partnerships.

METHODOLOGY

The National Fund for Workforce Solutions has provided funding to roughly 60 organizations leading workforce partnerships around the country (NFWS 2009). A selection of the workforce partnerships were chosen for this report and their coordinators were interviewed.²

Because the national network includes partnerships in many different industries (e.g., manufacturing, construction, health care, hospitality), it was important to select sites that contained workforce partnerships focusing on one or more of the most common. JFF staff and leaders of local funding collaboratives

facilitated contact with workforce partnership coordinators. Each of the individuals interviewed for this report were promised confidentiality because of the sensitive nature of their relationship with employers; thus their names and their organizations’ names and locations are not identified here.³

While this interview-based scheme provided rich, first-hand information about roughly one-fifth of the National Fund workforce partnerships, two factors limit the extent to which the challenges and outcomes of employer engagement are known.

First, no employers were interviewed. The research was designed to explore the experiences and perspectives of workforce partnership coordinators.

Second, this report did not draw on quantitative outcome data on job placements and/or advancements. In lieu of these data, this report references the national baseline evaluation of the National Fund and additional data collected by Workforce Learning Strategies, which coauthored the evaluation. These data provided essential background information on each workforce partnership. Moreover, interviews conducted with national experts provided valuable context to the information offered by workforce partnership coordinators.

What is clear is that workforce partnerships use a variety of strategies and tactics to engage employers, including one-on-one relationship building, periodic committee meetings, and employer focus groups. Some workforce partnerships have had success engaging employers by partnering with employer associations to build credibility with employers or by partnering with unions to capitalize on labor unions’ established relationships with employers.

All workforce partnerships report in some way or another that employers are at the center of the partnership, are the primary customer of the dual customer model, or drive or lead the partnership. For example, workforce partnerships first conduct skill needs assessments, then design their programs based on those needs. Workforce partnerships solicit ongoing feedback from employers about programs and placed workers. Third, workforce partnerships adapt based on employers’ feedback.

However, workforce partnerships face obstacles in serving employers. Many of the coordinators interviewed said their organizations are significantly limited by funding, resources, and staffing constraints. A number of the workforce partnerships interviewed have only one full-time staff member. Yet workforce partnerships report that they must undertake the time-consuming task of engaging frontline managers, supervisors, and workers to grasp skill needs and requirements for each employer. Moreover, employers are at times reluctant to participate because of their own resource or financial

constraints, or misconceptions about the costs of participation. Similarly, workforce partnerships have difficulty serving incumbent workers.

Among workforce partnerships' biggest challenges is coordinating training programs with service providers. In addition, workforce partnerships often hear from employers that soft-skill deficits remain a problem. Finally, workforce partnerships largely report that the economy has either limited or eliminated hiring in their sector.

On the other hand, many partnerships are finding ways to be creative and flexible to keep both the number of individuals in training and the number of placements into jobs as high as possible.



FINDINGS ON ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The first research question asks how workforce partnerships connect with employers to identify and address their hiring, training, and worker advancement needs. Three findings address the question of how workforce partnerships engage employers on these issues.

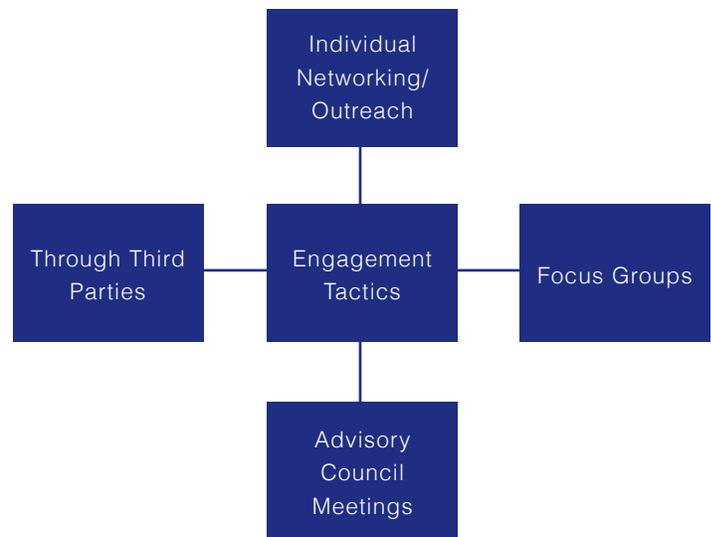
FINDING 1: WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIP COORDINATORS EFFECTIVELY ARE ENGAGING EMPLOYERS IN VARIOUS WAYS

The authors of the National Fund’s 2009 baseline evaluation report found that some partnerships provided the full range of services to employers envisioned by the workforce intermediary model; others partnerships provided a more limited set of services (Baran et al. 2009). Interviews with workforce partnership coordinators revealed the same variety in how they initiate engagement and sustain relationships with employers.

The method for engaging employers depends on the coordinators’ style, the industry sector, and the number of employers in the partnership. For example, employers in construction may have little time to engage in group meetings, and partnership coordinators may work through employer associations to build their trust. In health care and manufacturing, working directly with human resources departments and then drilling down to frontline managers and workers has been effective at creating and sustaining relationships. However, various strategies are used in each of the different sectors. Here are three key points on engaging employers:

- **Some workforce partnership coordinators prefer communicating with employers individually, though they may have numerous employer partners.** While all workforce partnerships have individual conversations with

employers, some of those interviewed expressed a preference for initiating and building relationships with employers individually.



Workforce Partnerships Engage Employers One-On-One

“Our director meets with employers in a one-on-one meeting on the needs. The training plan happens once per year only, but meetings with employers must be all year long. There is flexibility in revising, updating, and modifying the training plan.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“[We engage] each employer individually. You must engage them individually. . . . The services are built on what they need.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“We do one-on-one meetings with employers with whom we have established a relationship. . . . Which occupations we choose to do in a given timeframe is driven first by

labor market stats and then, more definitively, by what our employers tell us.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“[We engage] individually. For me, it’s a lot better to do. I enjoy the one-on-one conversation: it’s a chance to read faces, individuals. Groups aren’t as personable.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

“It’s also still a matter of having person-to-person relationships that need to be cultivated.”

—*Hospitality partnership coordinator*

- **Some workforce partnerships hold focus groups of employers to understand their needs.** Most workforce partnerships indicated that they have hosted or facilitated periodic meetings, either among employers exclusively, or among employers and other stakeholders such as training service providers. However, some partnership coordinators reported that they prefer holding focus groups to identify employer needs and challenges and to identify any common skills and competencies important to employers. These groups consist of managers, supervisors, and human resources professionals.

Workforce Partnerships Engage Employers in Focus Groups

“We do the drilling down through the HR people and focus groups with supervisors.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“We’ve been holding employer focus groups asking them what they’re looking for, what are their challenges, with HR people or chief operating folks. This is where our latest partnership emerged. . . . We ask them about their experiences, their challenges.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

- **Workforce partnership coordinators, particularly in construction and manufacturing, found success by engaging employers through employer associations.** Some workforce partnership count employer associations among their partners. They reported that these associations are valuable partners because of their employer networks and relationships, which are often more established than the relationships workforce partnership coordinators have built. Other workforce partnership coordinators reported that working with unions allows them to identify employer and worker needs accurately and, in some cases, to tap into unions’ relationships with employers.

Workforce Partnerships Work with Employer Associations and Unions

“What makes us different is that the union has put out word saying there’s money out there. Once we have the union on

board, they know who to get to the meeting and how to break through to the employers.”

—*Transportation/manufacturing partnership coordinator*

“We work with the unions closely. . . . It helps teach us about the industry, what’s available, what’s out there.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

“Construction is a very insular world. When the union goes to the employers, it means something; it’s not a cold call.”

—*Construction partnership coordinator*

“Employer associations are less constrained by time and represent more contractors. They already have buy-in from the contractors that they represent, who already feel that the employer associations represent their best interests.”

—*Construction partnership coordinator*

FINDING 2: WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIP COORDINATORS ARE PRIORITIZING EMPLOYER NEEDS

Nearly all the workforce partnership coordinators interviewed indicated that their partnerships are employer-led or employer-centered. Some workforce partnerships explicitly stated that employers lead the process, either by running periodic employer advisory meetings, dictating core competencies for training programs to emphasize, or choosing training programs and providers. A number of partnerships said the weekly or monthly meetings they coordinate are led by employer chairpersons or that they will soon be turning control of the meetings over to employers. Others indicated that employers led the partnerships.

National Fund Partnerships Are Employer-Driven

“The employer is the primary partner, whereas the old-school workforce development model was that the trainee is the only customer.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“It begins with a needs assessment with the employers, and then it’s building programs around those needs.”

—*Hospitality services partnership coordinator*

“Letting them [the employer] know they’re the boss [is the most important factor in creating partnerships]. It’s not just input. They drive the process. We just facilitate.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

“This partnership is primarily run by employers.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“Employers drive the process. . . . They say what their training needs are.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“This model places the highest value on employee involvement and decision making in program development and implementation.”

—Transportation/manufacturing partnership coordinator

There are several ways in which workforce partnerships are employer-led. In some cases, employers actually run periodic meetings of all the partnership stakeholders, including employers, community-based organizations, and service providers. In other cases, employers’ involvement is less visible but perhaps just as influential. Three key ways in which workforce partnerships place a priority on the employer perspective are:

- **Aligning training programming with employer skill needs.** The authors of the baseline evaluation report found that the most common services that workforce partnerships provide to employers are assessments of employer needs and screening and referral of job applicants (Baran et al. 2009). Workforce partnerships carry out these tasks in a number of different ways. Some design or broker training programs and curricula that explicitly meet employers’ reported needs. Several workforce partnership coordinators reported that they customize programs based on employer needs, including offering ad hoc or “one-off” trainings as needed by employers, eliminating training programs that employers do not want. Also, they will frequently ask the employers what training programs, core competencies, and types of credentials or certifications would be most appropriate for their needs. Other workforce partnerships reported that they work with entities in the education and training community (e.g., community colleges, technical colleges) to convey employer needs and convince education and training providers to change practices to better align with employer needs. It’s worth noting that working to align training programming with employer needs is a strategy used across sectors.

How Partnerships Work to Align Programming with Employer Needs

“The employers decide what education facilities they want to use—in some cases it’s us, in others . . . customization of competency-based curricula. The partnership is built on that from year to year. It’s adapted. [We] shed trainings and added some. It depends on what those employers tell us.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“It’s up to their level of engagement. We suggest core competencies and seek their input. . . . The needs assessment from 2007 does not necessarily match current needs, so we are constantly updating and adapting at nearly every meeting and almost every couple months.”

—Hospitality partnership coordinator

“We help them find the most appropriate training provider and setting. We’re more of a facilitator than a training institution. We subcontract with the ones that are the best fit and setting for each employer—those who can conduct training, have the capacity—and hire whoever is most appropriate.”

—Manufacturing partnership coordinator

- **Continually soliciting feedback from employers.** Many workforce partnerships meet with employers weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually explicitly to collect feedback about worker outcomes and training program effectiveness. Partnership coordinators sometimes conduct annual surveys of employers’ satisfaction with training and worker outcomes. Other coordinators are not yet ready to solicit feedback formally but indicated that they plan to conduct annual surveys once they have completed some training programs. All workforce partnerships gather feedback from employers about training programs once workers have completed training, been placed into a job, or advanced to a new position. Perhaps the most reliable sources of feedback, other than surveys, are repeat customers.

Partnership Coordinators Continually Solicit Feedback From Employers

“Right now, we’re working on a competency model with input from a subset of employers. Once we reach the higher levels of a competency model, we’ll broaden our outreach to more employers and get their feedback. I will be asking for their input repeatedly.”

—Construction partnership coordinator

“We administer an end-of-year annual survey. . . . We survey employers on whether the meetings are worth their time, whether the level and style of communication is a good fit, and their satisfaction with the training. . . . It’s also still a matter of having person-to-person relationships that need to be cultivated. When we catch wind of a problem, we try to reach out and call or contact them personally somehow.”

—Hospitality partnership coordinator

“Our interest is not just in engaging new employers but engaging current partners more. Our director meets with employers on a one-on-one meeting on the needs. The training plan happens once per year only, but meetings with employers must be all year long.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

- **Hire partnership staff/coordinators who have worked in the targeted industry sector.** A number of workforce partnership coordinators indicated that they, or someone on their staff, had work experience in the sector that was targeted by their partnership. Moreover, some reported that having this work experience allowed them to understand employer and worker needs better because they were familiar with the workplace,

had existing relationships with employers, or were better able to establish relationships.

Partnership Staff Have Work Experience in the Partnership's Targeted Sector

“I’m a registered nurse, spent time as a clinical nurse, manager, and then administrator . . . five to six years. I had a large base of entry-level workers and saw career pathways within my team.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“One other recommendation is to have some staff from the industry. Typically, if a partnership is forming, groups pick the agency workers—which is probably not the right formula. You need to get someone from the sector you want to engage.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

“Some of the staff comes from the [targeted hospitality] industry, like people who were bartenders or worked in kitchens previously.”

—*Hospitality partnership coordinator*

FINDING 3: WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIP COORDINATORS ARE TARGETING “GOOD FIT” EMPLOYERS

Several coordinators, particularly those whose partnerships are older, indicated that a key element of their engagement strategy was targeting employers. For some workforce partnership coordinators, targeting employers means focusing on businesses looking to fill mid-skill jobs that pay relatively well. These employers, one partnership coordinator noted, are often not targeted by traditional workforce development funders such as foundations. For other coordinators, targeting means focusing on employers whose leaders place a high value on training and development of their workforces. In either case, gauging which employers would be the right fit requires gathering advice from workers and employers in the targeted industry sector.

Workforce Partnerships Are Targeting “Good Fit” Employers

“We focus on good fits. Do they have a need for entry-level workers? Have we worked with them historically?”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

“We look for the high-wage employers that have entry-level openings in what . . . they [the employers] call middle-skilled jobs.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

“We targeted hospital systems. Most hospitals provide good benefits and pay. Nursing assistant jobs are about \$11-12 per hour and health unit coordinators pay about \$13-14 per hour. \$11 per hour is not necessarily a living wage, but it is way

better than minimum wage—so the hospital systems, which also provide two major medical systems, a dental plan, life insurance, disability insurance and a vision plan, provide very tangible benefits that we want people in our community to have.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“I want to pick employers that ‘get’ workforce development. . . . To gauge this, I talk to my resources and ask them: ‘who do you know that gets this stuff?’ I want someone who thinks big-picture, systemically . . . and we target people who think past the current downturn and are thinking ahead about future vacancies after retirements.”

—*Construction partnership coordinator*

Even though coordinators target employers who fit these criteria, it does not mean that workforce partnerships are not focused on serving employers. Instead, coordinators assess employers and target those whose practices in the workplace, pay and benefit structures, or skill needs fit the mission of the partnership. In cases where employer practices are not completely aligned with a partnership’s mission but the employer is otherwise a good fit for the partnership, coordinators work with employers to update and align workplace practices. But they cannot force their employer partners to change practices, lest they cause them to disengage from the partnership altogether.

Coordinators described this process as a collaboration on updating rules and practices in the workplace and accommodating employer needs. However, in some cases, coordinators realize employers are simply not going to be a good fit, either because the employer has a reputation of paying low wages or because the employer is not interested in advancing workers.

FINDINGS ON ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGES

The second research question asks what challenges workforce partnerships have experienced in working with employers to identify and address training needs and place or advance workers. Workforce partnership coordinators' responses generated the following findings.

FINDING 4: WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIPS ARE LIMITED BY FUNDING, STAFF, AND TIME

Among the constraints facing organizations that lead workforce partnerships is that their funding levels limit the number of staff members they can employ and the amount of time they can spend on any one task. In addition, some of the grants they receive for workforce development activities come with requirements that they must fulfill to continue receiving funds. Workforce partnerships report that such requirements are time-consuming and can detract from their other work.

Workforce Partnerships Are Limited By Resources

“It always takes more time and more staffing than anyone would like to pay for. We are generally understaffed to deal with issues like working with community colleagues. This is hours and hours of time, relationship building, committees and meetings . . . and no one wants to pay for that.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“The challenge is with the year-to-year funding. There is a lag time in telling employers what we can offer.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“Funding is always an issue. In any training program, you need to have funds and an ability to plan. This involves a lot of planning. Funds can be restricted to things and to time periods. It’s frustrating when a grant period pushes you to complete a program: we need more flexible funds.”

—Construction partnership coordinator

“Lack of funding causes lapses in employer engagement. That’s why we have to be continually on the lookout for the next source of funding.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

Some workforce partnership coordinators reported that one reason their funding is limited is because of the restrictions placed on different funding streams available through the Workforce Investment Act, and they advocated for policy changes to address this challenge. Two partnership coordinators, in particular, noted that the public workforce development dollars available through WIA are restricted to separate adult education programs and training program silos. Other funding problems mentioned by partnership coordinators are that WIA funds are now scarcer because of the economic downturn and that the public workforce development dollars through WIA often go to the employers offering the weakest pay and benefits.

Restrictions Placed on Workforce Investment Act Funds

“There are a lot of silos. We need one overarching workforce development system that allows long-term projects [and the] ability to innovate by using money from different pots. We do it now, but it’s a balancing act. It would allow us to do much more.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“To me, the biggest challenge is the non-connecting outcomes between Adult Basic Education programs [Title II WIA] and Trainings [Title I WIA]. We have to bridge a gap between these two if we’re going to place workers and serve employers. We need to be better connected and have more funding.”

—Manufacturing partnership coordinator

Several workforce partnership coordinators, particularly in health care and manufacturing, indicated that they thought it was critical to have in-depth conversations with

human resources professionals and with frontline managers, supervisors, and workers about employer needs, competencies that correspond to job requirements, and the development or identification of career pathways with each individual employer. It is also important for partnership coordinators to be able to convey information about training programs and services to frontline managers and workers. Setting up and conducting these conversations is extremely time-consuming. Because of resource limitations, they cannot always do as much of this direct engagement as is necessary to make their partnerships more effective at meeting employer needs. This is especially true for partnerships, mostly in health care and manufacturing, with large employer partners and different divisions that undertake different processes and require different competencies.

Another aspect of this challenge is that supervisors and managers may not have the time to work directly with workforce partnerships. But when these tasks can be undertaken successfully, workforce partnership coordinators report that they build trust between employers and the partnership lead organization.

Engaging Frontline Managers and Workers is Important But Challenging

“We need to do a better job of getting the information into the hands of managers who can then work with their employees. It often takes a manager who is supportive to give the employee the courage to participate in a program like ours. We also need to do more relationship development with managers and provide detailed information on what the participants are learning. When you first do outreach without managers engaged, you don’t know who will show up. It is much better to reach into specific departments working with managers.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“First, we’re working with large employers whose challenge is that we need to drill down to the supervisory level. . . . That’s where the need is. They know best about training needs and getting the workers to get involved. . . . This takes a lot of energy and effort—there are lots of supervisors who are already overloaded. It requires a commitment of the institution. We do focus groups and meet individually. It really is a new level of work.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“We may call an employer advisory meeting to look at the year ahead or at new funding streams with implications for best occupations to train to. The thing about employer advisory meetings is that employers will make it to three to four meetings and then attendance will begin to drop off if there is no further way to engage them. Finding new and continual ways to engage them is the big challenge.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“Part of it is coaches talking to supervisors about areas where they can improve. Building trust in what our motives are is important. We’ve built trust with HR, but moving down to the managers and supervisors and workers [is the challenge]. . . . It’s about developing trust. This could take five conversations, but it happens.”

—Hospitality partnership coordinator

“We also want to do some one-on-one work; we may have to bring in more staff to do this, to work directly with HR staff. . . . Trying to get a handle on what the expectations are for entry-level workers, the soft-skills part, is a challenge; [it’s] a bit of a barrier.”

—Manufacturing partnership coordinator

“Front office management does not have the intimate knowledge of the skills or working conditions or issues for every department or classification. Involving the actual workers in the skills taught in pre-employment training and assisting with the selection of new hires is very effective. It is helpful to have welders involved if you want to build a project for future welders for a variety of reasons, including the ownership and support of the project and project participants.”

—Manufacturing partnership coordinator

Several of the workforce partnerships considered for this report have only one full-time staff member. While many partnerships also rely on outside consultants and volunteers, networking, building relationships, and having ongoing conversations with employers are tasks that must be performed by a partnership coordinator who has sufficient time.

This was a stronger need among the younger workforce partnerships. However, one health care partnership coordinator reported that the partnership “director devotes a lot of time to employer engagement . . . [but] there is only one full-time staff person and . . . this can be a challenge.”

Coordinators reported that they need more time and staff to do a host of tasks related to employer engagement, including:

- Engaging frontline managers, supervisors, and workers to identify skill shortages, needs, and requirements;
- Working with community and technical colleges to align curriculum and training programs with employer needs;
- Conducting evaluation and information gathering from employers;
- Mentoring workers;
- Developing employer leadership;
- Fulfilling the requirements of their grants;
- Developing resources;

- Promoting industries; and
- Developing community partnerships.

**FINDING 5:
PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYER PARTNERS OFTEN HAVE TO
BE CONVINCED OF THE BENEFITS OF A WORKFORCE
PARTNERSHIP**

One frequent response that partnership coordinators receive from employers is that they cannot participate because of the costs of taking on an additional responsibility or service. To many employers unaware of the new orientation of workforce partnerships to dual customers, working with a workforce development initiative of any kind can seem burdensome and ultimately not rewarding. Overcoming that trust gap requires workforce partnerships to demonstrate success in training and placing workers.

**Employer Concerns About Costs or Perceived Lack Of
Benefits From Participating**

“Often, it’s around how much they can take on, engage in another effort; we face this in an ongoing way with all of them. The hesitation is, ‘Can we do it? Do we have the capacity to take on another initiative?’ For new employers, it goes against their culture. [They’ve] never engaged employees before. They don’t know what it involves on their part and it may feel like taking on extra work.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“Where some of the barriers exist is the—we’re approaching an employer [who says] ‘What is it going to cost me? Is there a membership fee? How we do over tuition payments? Who at my place is going to do this and how much of their time is this going to take?’”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“The biggest barrier is helping them understand what’s in it for them and how it helps their bottom line. Construction people, as a breed, tend to hate to go to meetings. . . . In construction, margins are very tight, so we have to be able to appeal to their greater interest, bottom line, and business concerns.

—Construction partnership coordinator

“There’s some reluctance to get involved again because of past problems with training organizations sending people who didn’t meet the employers’ criteria. . . . They just want to know what’s different from the past efforts. . . . The community is reluctant and skeptical. And all of this is exacerbated by the economy.”

—Construction partnership coordinator

According to the baseline evaluation, nearly all of the National Fund’s workforce partnerships reported offering a pre-employment program, while only 24 percent of workforce

partnerships offered an incumbent worker program (Baran et al. 2009). There are a number of reasons why this is the case, but employer cost constraints is especially a problem when it comes to engaging and serving incumbent workers. As a result, some workforce partnerships do not work with incumbent workers at all.

Construction workforce partnerships, for example, are focused exclusively on pre-employment and pre-apprenticeship trainings because career pathways already exist through construction apprenticeships. The challenge, though, is getting employers to take on apprentices they must ultimately pay. In health care and manufacturing, there are more explicit career pathways, and it’s difficult to work with employers on identifying incumbent worker skill needs and training those workers, especially when employers’ cost structures have suffered from weak economic activity.

**Challenges in Working With Employers on Incumbent
Worker Skill Needs**

“Where we are weaker is in communicating on specific trainees. . . . Training is a benefit, so it’s voluntary for the employees and requires self-selection. It cannot be ordered by the HR department at each employer. They can walk in and register for courses if they meet certain requirements, but it is up to them. People come on their own time—not paid release time. Managers don’t currently have leverage to require workers to participate. . . . Placing jobseekers—I’d say we’ve done well. Advancing incumbent workers is harder to say.”

—Hospitality partnership coordinator

“What I’ve seen is a difficulty in engaging the actual workers, unless there are sufficient supports for frontline workers who often work two jobs and struggle with supporting their families (e.g., release time for classes, counseling support, on site classes). . . . They have tuition reimbursement programs, but the student needs to qualify to get into that program; we find that workers often don’t qualify for higher education without preparatory classes that help to upgrade basic skills. . . . Employers have a hard time releasing workers unless there is a direct return on investment for them.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“We say, ‘We’re in this together.’ But the employers are sometimes hesitant to change their schedules to accommodate training times.”

—Health care partnership coordinator

“With some companies, when they don’t hire, they don’t need as many people—and layoffs mean they can’t release people for training.”

—Transportation/manufacturing partnership coordinator

Working with employers is a challenge, especially for partnerships that work with small and mid-sized employers,

according to several workforce partnership coordinators. The costs of taking on workforce development initiatives for smaller employers are proportionally greater. And the effect of the economic downturn has been more pronounced for these types of employers because they have not achieved the economies of scale that some larger employers enjoy.

Smaller Employers are Difficult to Engage

“Small employers are usually more difficult for incumbent programs because it’s hard to release people. It is also hard to have enough people to build a cohort. Often they don’t have resources . . . smaller budgets and much less administrative support for such programs.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“We’re also working with small and mid-sized employers and their needs are different. They have so many financial constraints in health care. Planning with them when they’re just trying to survive is so challenging.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“Sector strategies are good at the macro level, but our bread-and-butter is small and medium-sized employers trying to find their niche. They have different needs. Understanding the different the companies have.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

Another issue that hampers employer engagement is employer leadership change. While this concern was not a frequent response from the workforce partnership coordinators interviewed, those who identified it as a problem described it as one of the more significant challenges.

Leadership and Personnel Changes Can Set Back Employer Relations

“One employer had 25 people engaged in our services. They completely changed out the management of the department. It hurt our enrollment significantly for one cycle. Once we got the new leadership on board and committed, we started working through the issues and enrollment significantly increased.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“The hardest thing on the employer side is leadership changes: HR directors get promoted; union representatives leave.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

FINDING 6: CHALLENGES PERSIST IN COLLABORATING WITH TRAINING PROVIDERS

One frequently cited challenge facing workforce partnership coordinators is working with training providers. This is not because training providers are uncooperative; rather, it’s a challenge because of past miscommunication or distrust

between employers and training service providers. Or it’s a matter of updating training provider practices to be more responsive and adaptable to employer needs.

These problems were frequently cited by workforce partnership coordinators to be among their main barriers to working effectively on meeting employer needs. Moreover, these tasks are among the most time-consuming and intensive processes that workforce partnership coordinators must undertake because overcoming mistrust or misunderstandings sometimes requires a demonstration that the new way of doing things is beneficial for all partners involved.

Part of the challenge according to coordinators is that some employers consider the traditional workforce development system and its training institutions as ineffective at meeting employer needs. Overcoming this barrier requires employers to initially approve training programs, and then for trainees to complete the initial rounds of training services and be placed in jobs where they perform satisfactorily. Demonstrating success in this way is a medium- to long-term challenge for nascent workforce partnerships.

Building Trust Between Employers and Training Providers

“To the extent we’re trying to do this, you’re working with employers to do something they wouldn’t normally do. One challenge is the negative connotation towards any program that ‘helps poor people’—organizations like ours have gone to employers before and said, ‘Try our people’ and it hasn’t worked out.”

—*Construction partnership coordinator*

Training institutions play a vital role in workforce partnerships, according to the coordinators interviewed for this report. But training institutions, which may run successful degree-based programs, may need to be convinced that they should explicitly align programs and certifications to the needs of individual employers or groups of employers.

This is not an easy task. Training providers sometimes operate from out-of-date assumptions about what employers need. Partnership coordinators must translate employer needs to training providers and then work with providers to adapt programming to reflect these needs. For example, community college class schedules and curricula may not be aligned with employer schedules, or curricula may not line up with competency requirements. Therefore, working with colleges and other training providers to adapt program logistics and curricula to the explicit needs of employers requires time and staff support, often more so than many workforce partnerships can afford.

These challenges are complicated by the reality that employers may be reluctant to release workers during the work day for training or that lower-income workers have especially difficult time constraints. Training service providers may also be averse to working alongside their competitors in a partnership since this kind of relationship is completely different from their traditional mode of operating. Overcoming these barriers is not impossible, but it is a challenge most workforce partnership coordinators face.

Working With Training Providers Who are Unaware of Employer Needs

“The challenge is more with adult learners and to move them through the process—on a systems perspective, it’s learning how to work with our community colleges and have them be more flexible and adaptable with our adult learners. This is absolutely a need across the board. . . . Community colleges are often stuck in their traditional ways of serving students; often [they are] not adept at serving working adults and have little experience working with employers in a partnership. . . . The developmental education system does not have good outcomes.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“Technical colleges are very effective in their traditional role geared toward diplomas and Associate’s degrees. But they are not always in tune with what employers need right now or in the short term even though they do often have the space and staff to meet those needs. Technical schools all believe in the dual approach . . . [but] sometimes they are more interested in selling seat time and not what makes the most sense for employers and students.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

“You could have organizations that want to be the lead. . . . In the past, school A would go to employer A and want to be exclusive. Now, we have school A, B, C, and D in the room.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

“We can’t get community colleges to engage often.”

—*Transportation/manufacturing partnership coordinator*

FINDING 7: WORKERS’ BASIC SKILL DEFICITS REMAIN A ROADBLOCK TO ADVANCEMENT ALONG CAREER PATHWAYS

So far, most of the challenges that workforce partnerships face in terms of working with employers relate to characteristics of workforce partnerships, their training providers, or employers. Worker characteristics also present challenges when it comes to placing and advancing them.

A number of workforce partnership coordinators indicated that the literacy skills of both entry-level and incumbent workers created problems in worker readiness for occupational training. For example, contractors in some cities have entered community-benefit, project-labor, and local hiring agreements that compel them to hire from populations whose literacy levels may be below what is necessary for some training programs. Or preparing health care or manufacturing trainees for higher-level, collegiate trainings may require assigning some additional resources to upgrading literacy levels.

Advancing Incumbent and Entry-Level Workers With Literacy or Other Basic Skill Needs

“A lot of the workers we work with, we need to develop their basic skills so they can access higher-level training and collegiate programs. . . . So we have to figure out very innovative ways to work on basic skills so it doesn’t take up too much of their time. There’s no quick fix. It requires engaging workers in different levels of instruction over time, counseling to support folks.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“We hear a lot from employers on the lack of soft skills of entry-level workers and the challenge is how to integrate this into skills training programs. We have community-based organizations that provide ESL [English as a second language training] and other barrier remediation. Our role is to convene all these groups to work together.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

“For construction, there is already an established pathway via apprenticeship programs, but it doesn’t work well for everyone. Some people end up falling through the cracks or never starting on the pathway. We’re trying to improve the current system to get more individuals onto the pathway and prevent people from falling through the cracks.”

—*Construction partnership coordinator*

“Lack of basic reading comprehension among some hospital employees participating in training [is a challenge].”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

FINDING 8: THE ECONOMIC CRISIS HAS LIMITED HIRING AND DELAYED RETIREMENTS

The economic downturn has led to job losses across nearly all sectors of the economy that workforce partnerships have targeted. Only health care hiring remains relatively strong, according to partnership coordinators. Still, the job openings and the number of possibilities for incumbent worker advancement, in the health care sector and in others, have declined. These difficult realities were evident in interviews with workforce partnership coordinators.

Economic decline has affected employers and workforce partnership employer engagement in the following ways:

- Trainees take longer to get hired in many industries, especially manufacturing and construction, because hiring has stalled.
- Entry-level incumbent workers are more content to stay in their current jobs, which limits openings for jobseekers.
- Incumbent workers, especially nurses and other health care workers, are delaying retirement, which limits openings for job-seekers and incumbent workers to advance.
- Incumbent workers on maternity leave are returning to work more quickly than in the past, which limits job opportunities.
- Hospitals are experiencing less demand for elective surgeries.
- Workers waiting to find jobs disengage from an industry sector and look for other job opportunities.

Economic Downturn Has Limited Hiring and Career Advancement Opportunities

“All our employer partners with incumbent [worker] programs are still engaged with us, but it’s going to make a difference with how many positions are open for individuals looking to move up or who are coming from a pre-employment program.”
—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“It does take longer for people to get hired now. . . . People maybe can’t project what openings there will be and incumbents are more secure in staying where they are currently. [Employers are] more cautious.”
—*Hospitality partnership coordinator*

“With the economy, there are fewer or more postponed retirements, and people returning full time quickly after child birth. People are reentering the workforce. . . . So there is less demand, higher supply and bottom-line issues for hospitals.”
—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“Some employers would like to be involved, but they have other initiatives going on. A lot of manufacturers are just trying to weather this storm.”
—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

“Right now, no one is hiring. I haven’t yet begun working through the process of assessing hiring and rehiring needs. We hope to once the economy recovers.”
—*Construction partnership coordinator*

“Since our model is based on meeting industry needs, we have adjusted and are working with employers on incumbent worker training. But much of our funding is based on the performance of placing people in good jobs so . . . it’s flipped us on our heads. It’s limited where we can place people. . . . Now we don’t even need to hold orientations because we have waiting

lists. The really critical timing is when people will graduate and when their jobs will start.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

“Surprisingly, placements haven’t been as big a challenge as we expected this year. The bigger problem has been the apprenticeship jobs because that involves a financial commitment, a long-term investment that [the employers] don’t want to make. The challenge in this economy is to think more out of the box.”

—*Construction partnership coordinator*

“With some companies, when they don’t hire, they don’t need as many people—and layoffs mean they can’t release people for training.”

—*Transportation/manufacturing partnership coordinator*

Despite the pressure of the economic downturn on job placement, career advancement, and wages, workforce partnership coordinators expressed confidence that they could continue their work with trainees and remain successful.

Some of these coordinators were bolstered by their employer partners’ interest in preparing for future skill needs and believed in the importance of education and training for long-run needs. This was mostly the case in health care, where training programs for nurses and other professional positions take more time, so there is reasonable hope that trainees can stay in their current training programs and expect job openings to be available upon completion.

Maintaining Training Program Enrollments Despite a Weak Economy

“We’re still committed to it because these trainings take four years for people working.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“Academic progress alone is valuable.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“In long-term care, there’s always a need for LPNs [licensed practical nurses]. There’s definitely a shortage in [information technology] at higher levels. For RNs [registered nurses], there’s not a great need now, but there will be in the near future. In allied health, there’s definitely a need for different specialties. There are direct care workers, which are a huge need, but the problem is that they are lousy jobs in terms of pay and benefits. Health care continues to be an area of continued opportunities and huge needs.”

—*Health care partnership coordinator*

“The encouraging thing is that employers on the team recognize that we need to make sure our workforce is better skilled than it was in the past.”

—*Manufacturing partnership coordinator*

LESSONS FROM WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIPS

This report asked two research questions:

1. How do workforce partnerships funded by the National Fund for Workforce Solutions engage and work with employers to identify and meet employer needs?
2. What barriers or challenges do workforce partnerships face in engaging and working with employers?

Interviews with workforce partnership coordinators revealed answers to those questions. The following section contains the key lessons and recommendations that can be aggregated from those findings and from additional responses and separate interviews with site coaches, local funding collaborative directors, and nationally recognized experts.

ON EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The first research question asks how workforce partnerships engage with employers, and how they sustain strong employer participation. The lessons about how workforce partnerships engage employers and recommendations for partnership coordinators are:

- **Effective employer engagement is rooted in prioritizing and demonstrating an ability to meet employer needs.** Most of the workforce partnership coordinators consider employers to be their primary partners. But more important than who leads the partnership's monthly meeting is which interest drives the strategic agenda. As the baseline evaluation reports, most workforce partnerships view employer engagement tactically, as a means to improving outcomes for low-income workers (Baran et al. 2009).

Many workforce partnerships have found success in orienting their programs to meet employer needs—they have found this is the most effective way to build trust and cultivate relationships. This puts partnerships in a better position to

place workers and advance incumbents along rewarding career pathways.

Yet some workforce partnership coordinators report that the extent of employer involvement is attendance at advisory meetings. As one coordinator reported a constant struggle with the employers about trying to maintain their level of participation. Below are recommendations from workforce partnership coordinators about how they maintain employer participation and build sustainable relationships.

- » **RECOMMENDATION: Involve frontline supervisors and workers in needs assessments to identify employer needs.** Pushing needs assessments beyond human resources personnel to the front lines is enormously time-consuming. Workforce partnership coordinators in all industry sectors should expand their capacity to engage operating-level personnel. When expanding capacity is not possible, coordinators should consider deemphasizing top-level engagement activities and shifting those resources (e.g., time, money) to drill down to the frontline supervisors and workers.
- » **RECOMMENDATION: Engage groups of employers rather than single employers when possible.** By targeting groups of employers, rather than working with employers one at a time, workforce partnership coordinators can reduce costs of participation to each individual firm, aggregate demand for trainee services and job opportunities, build an atmosphere of trust, and create a problem-solving, employer-led initiative. Individual discussions and needs assessments can still be a part of the process, but aggregating employer demands and needs is more efficient for all parties. In cases where targeting groups of employers is not possible, coordinators should use relationships with current employer partners to build trust with prospective employer partners. For example,



one manufacturing partnership coordinator noted that having a partnership with one of the large firms in the targeted industry sector helped build partnerships with other employers because “they help identify the other companies and their suppliers and help other employers show up.”

- » **RECOMMENDATION: Partner with employer associations when possible.** Employer associations have extensive experience working with many of the employers that workforce partnership coordinators have targeted. This means they command the trust of many employers. Partnership coordinators, especially those who have launched their partnerships within the last three years, should partner with employer associations to expedite their employer engagement process and tap into these associations’ networks.
- » **RECOMMENDATION: Invest in reliable data collection mechanisms that measure employer and community benefits longitudinally and create advertising and communications strategies to advertise those successes to current and potential employer partners.** Several workforce partnership coordinators reported that they do not measure employer satisfaction outcomes with surveys. Yet reliable data-driven decision making has proven an effective way to manage limited resources.
- » **RECOMMENDATION: Work with employers to demonstrate the community benefits of the workforce partnership’s work and the employer’s role in it.** Several workforce partnership coordinators reported that this strategy was effective at building public support.
- » **RECOMMENDATION: Protect employers from public-sector red-tape and paperwork requirements by taking on those responsibilities for employers.** As one workforce partnership coordinator reported, “Employers often have to talk to too many case managers.” Workforce partnership staff should also become familiar with requirements for public monies and public support resources, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, and facilitate services for employers. By undertaking both these responsibilities, partnerships can help workers while offering an additional service to employers by reducing their paperwork burden.
- » **RECOMMENDATION: Provide employers with information—and lots of it.** One workforce partnership coordinator reported that providing employers with information such as assessment materials, training schedules, and weekly attendance and progress reports for each student, made them “very happy.”

» **RECOMMENDATION: Be explicit with employers about the contributions required for participation so that employers can anticipate and plan for the costs.**

• **Forecasting and preparing for employers' future labor needs provides significant value.** A number of workforce partnership coordinators reported that what's allowed them to maintain relationships with employers is an ability to adapt to employers' changing needs and emerging industry trends. Macro-level trends can certainly provide insight on how industry sector needs are changing, but engaging employers directly on this question is often an effective way for workforce partnership coordinators to anticipate emerging needs and prepare to meet them. Below are suggestions from partnership coordinators about how to work with employers on future needs.

» **RECOMMENDATION: Forecast future skill shortages.** For example, one construction partnership coordinator relies on a sophisticated labor-forecasting device to analyze data from contractors (the supply side) and owners (the demand side) to identify upcoming construction projects' workforce shortages. The key ingredient to the model's success is attaining buy-in and contributions from both parties on upcoming projects and current personnel, which helps provide meaningful data for analysis by the partnership coordinator. In sectors like construction, this is a way for workforce partnerships to plan for the ebbs and flows of each profession (Conway & Gerber 2009). Moreover, many National Fund partnerships expect a flood of retirements in the coming years, especially once the economy stabilizes.

» **RECOMMENDATION: Adapt programming to employers' future needs.** One of the key lessons from Project QUEST was that it changed its approach as the local economy changed (Rademacher et al. 2001). Some workforce partnership coordinators already operate according to that credo. For example, one health care partnership coordinator reported that expanding that partnership's focus beyond its usual work on Associate's degree clinical jobs allowed it to identify new job opportunities and create programs to prepare workers for them. More broadly, workforce partnership coordinators may need to shift their focus from long-term training programs to more short-term, ad hoc programming. The key is uncovering what employers actually need from training programs and finding a way to meet that need with the training providers. On the other hand, being adaptive may push past the limit of the National Fund's mission to create sectoral initiatives, because adapting to new economic circumstances may necessitate shifting

sectors altogether. But partnership coordinators may be able to reconcile these seemingly contradictory strategies by focusing on how employers' needs evolve and staying close to employers in order to monitor those changes and respond to them.

ON EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

The second research question asks what challenges and barriers workforce partnership coordinators face in engaging employers to identify and meet their needs. Lessons about the challenges facing coordinators and recommendations to overcome those challenges are:

• **Incumbent worker training programs are more difficult to implement.** In sectors with high incumbent worker needs—health care and manufacturing, in particular—workforce partnership coordinators report that the need and opportunities for incumbent worker advancement remain strong, despite the economic downturn.

But partnership coordinators still face barriers to meeting employer needs, including employer reluctance to release workers or pay for them to attend training during the work day, workers' basic skill deficits, and, in some cases, few incentives for workers to participate. The economy has exacerbated those challenges.

Older partnerships report having a good sense of what employers need and when opportunities arise for working with incumbents. The newer workforce partnerships report working with incumbent workers less than do the older ones. It may be old news to the experienced leaders running National Fund partnerships, but working with employers to identify their incumbent worker skill shortages and finding ways to address them efficiently would help develop additional trust with employers (Kazis, Prince, & Rubin 2003; Taylor & Rubin 2005). Moreover, incumbent worker training for greening efforts is more relevant these days because of increased funding opportunities and incentives for companies to become more "green," which requires incumbent workers becoming more literate about "green" processes and technologies (White & Gordon 2010).

Workforce partnership coordinators offered the following suggestions about how to work with incumbents:

» **RECOMMENDATION: Provide or identify employer personnel to serve as career coaches or retention specialists.** One workforce partnership coordinator said, "We're looking at retention counselors or job-

imbedded job coaches because, even after the training, some individuals have issues they need to work through and employers can rely on the job coach to address those concerns.”

- » **RECOMMENDATION: Work with employers to integrate incentives for incumbent workers (and pre-employment trainees) with employers’ requested competencies and national competency-based certifications.** Workforce partnership coordinators reported that a gap remains in many employer incentive structures—including pay and promotions—between what core competencies they convey to coordinators and how they reward new skill certifications that are aligned with those competencies. In cases where incumbent workers must attend training on their own time, they often have no incentives to do so as a result.
- **Improving basic skills/literacy training and preparation is a common need.** One frequent point of emphasis in interviews with workforce partnership coordinators was that employers often report that basic skill levels inhibit the advancement of incumbent who lack the literacy or soft skill levels needed to participate in higher-level training programs (Taylor & Mitchner 2001).
 - » **RECOMMENDATION: Workforce partnership coordinators should prioritize resources for addressing workers’ basic skill deficits.**
- **Translating employer needs to training providers remains a challenge.** While working with training providers on employer needs is an essential component of the dual customer model, partnership coordinators across sectors report that this remains a challenge. Carrying out this task requires painstaking efforts by workforce partnerships to change the goals of education and training institutions. Partnership coordinators suggested that getting input from the education community about how to build relationships is important, but that tactfully conveying that training providers needed to change was even more effective.
 - » **RECOMMENDATION: Hire or consult with individuals from the education and training community to help build trust and productive relationships with training providers that have yet to buy in to the dual customer model.**
- **Workforce partnership coordinators that adapt to the economic realities can continue providing value for their employer partners despite current economic conditions.** One workforce partnership coordinator reported drawing on a funding opportunity to create a citizenship program for employers that hire first-generation immigrant workers. The program was free for all involved and bolstered the

employer’s standing in the community. As the coordinator said, “New services, new money . . . always gets their attention and lets them know you are in partnership with them.”

Some ways in which workforce partnership coordinators can be similarly creative are to:

- » **RECOMMENDATION: Invest in training certification programs that prioritize flexibility in scheduling and requirements.**
- » **RECOMMENDATION: Create subsidized employment opportunities for workers to provide invaluable on-the-job training for workers and a built-in screening process for employers.** As one construction partnership coordinator reported, “Because contractors have been burned in the past, we’re looking at subsidized employment opportunities to give workers valuable on-the-job training after they have completed their training certificate and give the employer the chance to assess workers on the job.”
- » **RECOMMENDATION: Draw on public resources to create flexible options for employers considering layoffs of incumbent workers.** One example is shared work, which subsidizes one or more days a week with Unemployment Insurance helps employers avoid layoffs.
- » **RECOMMENDATION: Work with employers to identify cross-training opportunities and create training programs that align with those opportunities.** Workforce partnership coordinators did not frequently mention efforts to create on-the-job training programs or internships.
- » **RECOMMENDATION: Forecast future local labor market needs and opportunities and adapt the workforce partnership to them.** As several expert interviewed reported, the mark of a successful workforce initiative is being able to weather economic storms. One way to do so is to be a highly adaptable lead organization and be ready to expand into training for other types of job openings or even entirely different industry sectors.

A CONCLUDING NOTE ON THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN INDUSTRY SECTORS

Because of the sectoral focus of the initiatives funded by the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, it is important to understand how engagement strategies, challenges, and lessons differ in any significant ways across workforce partnerships in different industry sectors.

Workforce partnerships in different sectors do share many challenges. In varying degrees, they all have resource

limitations, hear from employers about workers' basic skill deficits, and must demonstrate value to employers in order to build lasting relationships. They have also been affected by the economy—even health care, though to a somewhat lesser degree. The differences between them that do emerge are in the employer engagement strategies and tactics they use.

In construction, because of the established career pathway through apprenticeships, the focus of workforce partnerships is on pre-employment training. Engagement occurs more often through employer associations, perhaps because contractors are smaller employers and are more time constrained than employers in other sectors. In manufacturing and health care, there is more variety. Thus, workplace mentoring or engaging frontline managers and supervisors may be a less urgent need in construction than it is in sectors that allow for deeper levels of engagement.



THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

Despite the efforts of workforce partnership coordinators all around the country to engage employers, they still must contend with a much less favorable local labor market than did Project QUEST, the Jobs Initiative, and other pioneering workforce intermediaries from which the National Fund for Workforce Solutions draws some of its inspiration. And many economists—including those at the Federal Reserve—think unemployment will remain elevated through the first half of this decade (Aversa 2010).

Yet there are many reasons to expect that workforce partnerships should still be able to work with employers. For instance, most of the partnership coordinators interviewed for this report noted that they were taking proactive steps to adapt to the new economic climate. Moreover, skill shortages persist in key sectors targeted by the National Fund. In a national survey of manufacturing firms conducted by Manufacturing Institute in 2009, 32 percent of firms reported “moderate to serious shortages” of qualified workers while 38 percent foresaw “increased shortages ahead” (Deloitte, The Manufacturing Institute, & Oracle 2009).

Similarly, a 2007 report analyzing Bureau of Labor Statistics forecast data on “middle-skill” jobs “that generally require some significant education and training beyond high school but less than a Bachelor’s degree” found that “employers will have greater difficulty and face greater costs meeting their skill needs, especially in key sectors and geographic areas where retirements are greatest and immigrants are least likely to meet their hiring needs” (Holzer & Lerman 2007). This often-cited report noted that shortages of mid-skilled workers were particularly a problem for manufacturing professions such as machinist and technician.

Workforce partnership coordinators reported that health care employers are still hiring and that labor needs will continue to be strong for key health services professions. Moreover, green and high-technology sectors and professions can now draw on new sources of capital via the federal stimulus package and newfound public attention. The National Renewable Energy Lab has found that workers are in short supply for the many specialized jobs in growing and emerging occupations (e.g., energy auditor, wind turbine technician), as well as in existing professions (e.g., machinist, welder) that will require additional training as their industries become greener by introducing new low-carbon or efficient processes and technologies (White & Gordon 2010). Incumbent worker training, in particular, is important in this regard for teaching workers about new green processes and technologies.

Green sector and health care employers may be ready to hire workers but be unable to identify enough individuals with the appropriate skills. *Thus, the opportunity for workforce partnerships to serve employer customers still exists—even in this economy.*

APPENDIX A.

WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIP COORDINATOR

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The intent of the interview questions was to determine what challenges workforce partnerships face as they engage employers to create partnerships, assess needs, and cultivate longer-term relationships.

These interview questions were reviewed by Harvard University's Committee on the Use of Human Subjects. Interviewees had the opportunity to decline to answer any of the questions and had the ability to voice concerns either to the questioner or to the Harvard CUHS office. All interviewees were promised confidentiality to ensure they felt free to be candid about their challenges. For questions related to the interview process, please contact the author.

1. Background:

- » When was your workforce partnership formed?
- » What are the objectives and what is the strategy for achieving them?
- » In what sector is it focused?
- » How many staff does your partnership have?

2. The role of employers:

- » How many employer partners are there?
- » Were these employers involved with your workforce partnership from its beginning?
- » Do/did you have to recruit employers as partners? Please describe that process. Would you describe the process as selling your organization to employers or collaborating with them?
- » Are you recruiting more employers as partners?
- » How do/did you identify businesses to target as partners?
- » Is working with employers to assess their hiring and rehiring needs a part of the process? Is it important? Please describe that process.

- » You mentioned that your workforce partnership includes a training organization(s). Do employers have input on the curriculum and type of training programs you conduct? How?
- » What would you describe as the greatest barrier to creating partnerships with employers?
- » What would you describe as the most important factor or asset in creating partnerships with employers?
- » Has your ability to partner with employers changed because of the economy? How? How have you responded to that change?
- » Do you measure employer satisfaction with the services you provide? If so, how?

3. Workers:

- » What kind of workers do you train: jobseekers, incumbent workers, or both?
- » Please describe the program that your trainees complete.
- » Have you met your objectives (e.g., placing jobseekers and/or advancing incumbent workers)? Do the outcomes differ significantly based on the race or any other characteristics of the workers?
- » Do you have a screening process for jobseekers? For incumbent workers? Please describe how you screen workers.
- » Has the supply of jobseekers been adequate to meet employer needs? If not, please elaborate. Is this a significant obstacle to meeting employer needs or your organization's objectives?
- » Do you continue providing any services to workers after they have been placed or advanced to a new position?

APPENDIX B.

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Evidence from 25 interviews with partnership staff helped generate the findings for this report. All were promised confidentiality so that they would have the freedom to discuss their strategies and challenges candidly. Interviewees include 12 workforce partnership coordinators, as well as multiple site coaches and local funding collaborative directors working with these coordinators.

The author also interviewed eight experts in workforce development partnerships and/or intermediaries:

- » Daniel E. Berry, Greater Cleveland Growth Association
- » Susan Crandall, Director, Workforce Innovation, Keystone Research Center
- » Josh Freely, Senior Research Associate & Director of Labor Market Research, Public Private Ventures
- » Robert Giloth, Director, Family Economic Success, Annie E. Casey Foundation
- » Jennifer McNelly, Senior Vice President, Manufacturing Institute
- » Jack Mills, Director, National Network of Sector Partners, and a graduate of the Harvard Kennedy School Master's of Public Administration program
- » Geri Scott, National Fund for Workforce Solutions Program Director, Jobs for the Future
- » John Strock, Associated Builders and Contractors

Please contact the author with questions about the interviewees or the sample of workforce partnership coordinators.



ENDNOTES

¹ Workforce partnership coordinators are those individuals employed by the organizations which lead workforce partnerships, including community-based and nonprofit organizations, employer associations, employers, and training institutions.

² Please see Appendix A for an explanation of how interviews were conducted and a copy of questions workforce partnerships were asked.

³ Please contact the author or JFF for more information.

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