

# GREATER CINCINNATI SUPPLY CHAIN INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIP

By: Kate O'Sullivan and Don Spangler

The key to effective industry partnerships is highly engaged employers who are able to develop a robust talent pipeline for regional industries. A supply chain management partnership in the Greater Cincinnati region has all of the elements for success: strong business participation, leadership and coordination from an industry veteran, and outreach to different labor pools — high schools, community colleges, universities, and low-income unemployed adults — within the community. This case study covers the background, structure, funding, methods, and transferable lessons of Supply Chain OKI (OKI refers to Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana), which is effectively meeting the demand for supply chain-related jobs in Greater Cincinnati.

## About Partners for a Competitive Workforce

One of more than 30 regional workforce funder collaboratives in the National Fund for Workforce Solutions' network, **Partners for a Competitive Workforce** (PCW) serves the Greater Cincinnati region, including parts of Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana. PCW was established in 2008 by the Greater Cincinnati Foundation and other regional leaders. It has been housed at the United Way of Greater Cincinnati since 2011. The organization brings together businesses, workforce boards, chambers of commerce, secondary and post-secondary educational institutions, service providers, and philanthropic funders to serve employers, address skill shortages in high-demand industries, and coordinate service delivery. For over a decade PCW has worked with employers and stakeholders to develop industry partnerships in many sectors, including advanced manufacturing, health care, construction, and information technology. This record of success has fueled PCW's efforts to create its supply chain management industry partnership, Supply Chain OKI.

“Too often the public doesn’t understand that [supply chain jobs] are desirable jobs that lead to good incomes and satisfying careers. We needed to educate our community about today’s supply chain opportunities.”

– **Mardia Shands, Executive Director**  
Partners for a Competitive Workforce



## A Broader Definition of Supply Chain Management

PCW's definition of supply chain management includes careers traditionally associated with transportation, distribution, and logistics — e.g., truck drivers and warehouse workers — as well as a range of highly skilled positions related to supply chain brokerage, process and quality control, procurement, marketing, and customer service, among others. The choice to create a broad definition came at the urging of employers, who believed that transportation and logistics reinforced outdated stereotypes about the supply chain industry and undervalued its dynamic occupations and functions, which intersect with manufacturing, retail, and other sectors. Significantly, supply chain management has gained in importance in an era of global markets and sourcing and a business environment characterized by limited inventory and just-in-time delivery.



## Need and Rationale

Due to its geographic location, Greater Cincinnati serves as a transportation hub for a variety of employers with regional, national, and international reach.<sup>1</sup> As the economy emerged from the Great Recession in the early 2010s and the need to move products grew rapidly, supply chain-related businesses in the region found it increasingly difficult to identify qualified job applicants.<sup>2</sup> To address these needs, and to take advantage of the openness to innovation and “learn quickly, fail fast” attitudes of many employers, PCW formed Supply Chain OKI in 2015.

## A True Partnership

### Active employer engagement

In shaping Supply Chain OKI, PCW held extensive discussions with employers, regional workforce boards, community leaders, and educational institutions. Based on these discussions and to ensure that the emerging partnership would meet industry needs, PCW formed an employer advisory council to provide direction and funding to the partnership and foster accountability. Another critical goal was to change the perception of supply chain-related positions, moving away from the “pick, pack, and ship” image and replacing it with the vision of a pathway to a variety of sophisticated, highly skilled positions. The advisory council used a variety of approaches and platforms — including job fairs and expos, a website, and social media — to promote this change in public perception.<sup>3</sup>

### Interconnected working groups

To address specific areas essential to the success of Supply Chain OKI, PCW identified four key stakeholders and formed working groups around them. These working groups engage with the advisory council to ensure that their work aligns with and supports the overall Supply Chain OKI strategy.

- **Employer Team** — identifies regional supply chain employment opportunities and ensures that training meets industry needs and standards
- **Education Team** (including the K–12 system, community colleges, and four-year institutions) — offers preparation and articulated instruction in supply chain jobs
- **Community Team** (including community-based organizations) — recruits and supports potential supply chain employees
- **Training Team** (primarily comprised of postsecondary institutions such as Cincinnati State and Gateway Community and Technical College) — provides short-term training and credentialing in a variety of supply chain occupations

Each team meets quarterly and members work closely with PCW staff between formal sessions to address programmatic and operational details such as transportation and child care and to make sure that all elements of the supply chain pathways function effectively.

## Comprehensive Approach

Supply Chain OKI pursues a multi-pronged approach to reach and prepare employees. It recruits and trains adults who are currently out of the workforce but can be prepared for employment by community organizations and postsecondary training institutions. It also engages high school students in supply chain career pathways, preparing them to enter the workforce after graduation or pursue additional supply chain-related education.

### Adult recruitment and training

Over the past two years, Supply Chain OKI has focused on helping businesses find employees to fill 12,000 supply chain-related jobs. To this end, PCW works closely with a network of community organizations and agencies, including the Urban League, Easter Seals, and the regional Community Action Agency, to identify and recruit potential employees and set them on pathways leading to certifications in supply chain management fields. Supply Chain OKI initially focused on truck driving and getting people commercial driver’s licenses but, based on employers’ needs, soon expanded to include the broad range of supply chain jobs and careers.

<sup>1</sup>Transportation and logistics account for 7.3 percent of employment — 71,610 jobs — in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, slightly above the national average, according to federal labor data cited in “The jobs are there, but the talent isn’t,” Cincinnati.com, August 8, 2014, <http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2014/08/07/jobs-talent/13756127/>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.supplychainoki.com/>





With support from Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) dollars through regional workforce boards, Supply Chain OKI developed and funds work readiness training and supply chain career exposure at community organizations. Would-be employees then transition to technical training, also funded by WIOA resources, at one of many participating training institutions. The partnership holds frequent job fairs in easily accessible locations where candidates can learn about the range of available occupations and apply for part- and full-time jobs.

Employers, community organizations, and training organizations meet regularly to guarantee that the preparation and training provided are driven by industry needs and designed to meet workplace expectations. These gatherings, often held at the offices of employer partners, are straightforward problem-solving sessions that address nuts-and-bolts issues related to preparing and supporting potential employees.

### **Pathways for high school students**

Supply Chain OKI's work with schools was driven by employers, who stressed the importance of building a high school pipeline for supply chain careers. As a result, PCW reached out to school districts to explore their interest in creating opportunities for students to learn about and prepare for available positions.

PCW found that schools were willing partners in the Supply Chain OKI partnership for at least two reasons: the project created high-quality career opportunities for students, and the State of Ohio school accountability provisions include industry-recognized credentials as integral components of high school graduation requirements.

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“At first, I was nervous about working with high school students. I was thinking, “Are they going to be of any use to us?” But I was blown away by the maturity and engagement of the young adults we hosted.”

– Lacy Starling, President  
Legion Logistics

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Operationally, the partnership works with schools to build student interest by offering informational sessions, guest speakers, and career expos for students and parents. These underscore the new image of supply chain careers, moving beyond warehousing and truck driving into purchasing, information systems, inventory control, and freight brokerage, and, eventually, into fields such as engineering, finance, and accounting.

Based on the high level of interest generated by these sessions, PCW and the schools developed job shadowing and co-op programs that enable some students to gain exposure to supply chain workplaces, and potentially earn postsecondary credit-bearing credentials at participating institutions. This approach affords many opportunities for students, including part-time employment during high school, full-time employment after graduation with their co-op employer, and tuition-reimbursement for additional postsecondary training.





More recently, PCW sought to expand the co-op model with supply chain apprenticeships, but learned that Ohio did not recognize supply chain-related jobs as apprenticeships. Therefore, PCW approached the State of Ohio's Apprenticeship Council with a plan to create and implement supply chain apprenticeships. The state agreed, and PCW is now working to develop these new programs.

To date, Supply Chain OKI's school-focused efforts have reached over 3,500 students, with 97 young people completing certified logistics and technician training and earning certification in logistics, while earning three hours of postsecondary credit.

### **Diverse Funding Sources**

Supply Chain OKI has successfully tapped into and braided multiple sources of funding: state and federal government, philanthropic, and employers/businesses, as well as leveraging funds available to educational institutions (e.g., financial aid for individuals). The Supply Chain OKI partnership was jump-started by a two-year grant from the State of Ohio to stimulate industry partnerships that provided operational support early on. The effort also benefited from federal Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training<sup>4</sup> funds available to Cincinnati State, which provided important background research, stimulated interest, and built capacity at the institution to provide supply chain curricula and coursework.

Preparation of would-be supply chain employees by community organizations and technical training by postsecondary institutions is supported by WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker funds, made available by regional workforce boards.

In some cases, employers make substantial investments to support the work of the partnership and the individuals it trains, including transportation; internships and co-ops; tuition reimbursement; the costs of certificates and credentials; and workplace coaches for those who need support balancing education, work, and life issues. There are also significant in-kind contributions, including a business contact for each participating high school and ongoing support for the partnership's operational aspects.

PCW and Supply Chain OKI have also created an employer-paid "innovation fund" through the United Way of Greater Cincinnati. This fund has helped launch creative new models such as summer opportunities for high school students between 11th and 12th grades to learn marketable supply chain-related skills, providing a jump-start for part-time jobs in their senior year and, eventually, full-time jobs; and videos highlighting the industry and its opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.doleta.gov/taacct/>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.supplychainoki.com/resources/>

## Lessons and Key Takeaways

Several lessons are emerging from Supply Chain OKI's work that can benefit other collaboratives and stakeholders.

### ***Insist on a high degree of coordination and management***

Like most collaborative leaders, Supply Chain OKI continually works with partners to build relationships, seek guidance, offer support, and identify and troubleshoot problems and challenges. This level of attention and care is essential to the success of any complex partnership.

### ***Hire staff with background in relevant industry to lead the partnership effort***

A key factor in Supply Chain OKI's success was hiring Jesse Simmons, a retired executive from Cincinnati-based Procter and Gamble, as director. As a result, the partnership is guided by a leader with strong relationships in the industry and an in-depth understanding of the needs of supply chain employers. This gives the partnership credibility and helps ensure that the work's strategic direction supports employer needs.

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■ ■ It's astonishing how bought-in employers are. Everyone's engaged — and not just theoretically. They're opening their checkbooks to provide real support for this work. ■ ■

— Lacy Starling

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### ***Look for early wins that can demonstrate success and build momentum for more ambitious work***

PCW had early successes that benefitted a range of stakeholders, including developing a commercial driver's license training program to address immediate hiring needs, and designing and implementing a high school co-op program. These quick wins demonstrated that the partnership could produce results and underscored its value to employers.

### ***Educate the public about available employment opportunities***

Supply Chain OKI partners recognized that the public needed a clearer understanding that supply chain jobs and those in other sectors, like advanced manufacturing, can lead to a variety of well-paying careers. Supply Chain OKI drove this message home through outreach and marketing efforts, including informational presentations in community settings, schools, job shadows, career fairs, and a high-impact website and videos, all involving education, community, and employer partners.

## ***How To Be Successful***

- **Insist on a high degree of coordination**
- **Hire staff with industry background**
- **Look for early wins**
- **Educate the public**
- **Maintain regular communication**
- **Engage educational institutions**
- **Seek out nontraditional employees**

### ***Maintain regular communication with employers and business partners***

In addition to formal advisory groups and standing committee sessions, Simmons meets regularly with individual employers to learn about their needs and concerns. This work assures employers that the partnership can fill their requirements.

### ***Work with employers to build relationships with schools and cultivate students as future employees***

Supply Chain OKI's experience demonstrates that schools and industry can create strong partnerships in developing potential employees. Employer interest spurred the development of Supply Chain OKI's high school internships, co-ops, and certification programs, and these relationships are benefitting employers, schools, and young adults by creating pathways to in-demand jobs and sustaining careers.

### ***Seek out nontraditional employees***

PCW is keenly aware that labor market participation rates are only about 62 percent nationally, and that more than 20 percent of the unemployed have been out of work for more than six months.<sup>6</sup> In this time of low unemployment rates, PCW sees an opportunity to reach out to and reengage thousands of out-of-work adults in the Greater Cincinnati region and bring them back into the labor force as skilled supply chain employees.

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■ ■ Where is the workforce of the future? In some cases, it's our schools. In others, it's the long-term unemployed, or nontraditional workers, or those who are not currently in the labor force. We want to give everyone an opportunity. ■ ■

— Jesse Simmons, Director  
Supply Chain OKI

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<sup>6</sup>The Employment Situation: October 2018. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>



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“What amazes me is how quickly the partnership has come together and begun to effect change in our community. It’s a great framework which others can use.”

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– Lacy Starling

## EMPLOYER PROFILE: LEGION LOGISTICS

Lacy J. Starling is president and “fearless leader” of Legion Logistics,<sup>7</sup> a nine-year-old firm that has grown from a one-woman operation to a company of 30 employees and more than \$30M in sales. Based in Florence, Kentucky, Legion prides itself on creative problem-solving, motivated employees, and high levels of customer service and satisfaction.

Starling and Legion have been part of Supply Chain OKI from its initial stages. In early 2015, Starling was volunteering her time to help Gateway Community and Technical College in Northern Kentucky build a curriculum focused on supply chain careers. Jesse Simmons, director of Supply Chain OKI, appreciated Starling’s commitment to the field and asked her to join the advisory council.

In addition to serving on the advisory council, Starling began working with administrators, faculty, and parents at Lloyd Memorial High School, where 60 percent of students are eligible for free lunch, to build awareness of supply chain careers and opportunities they afforded students.

As a result, the school developed a co-op program for interested students which offered internships and enabled them to

attend classes at Gateway where they can earn postsecondary credits and stackable credentials. Starling frequently visits and speaks to groups of employers to explain the value of engaging in high school co-op programs, helping to debunk negative stereotypes of teenagers, and ease employers’ concerns about bringing young people into their workplaces.

In addition to her ongoing work with the high school co-op programs, more recently Starling has become engaged in job and hiring fairs aimed at recruiting unemployed and underemployed adults, another Supply Chain OKI focus.

Starling has two primary reasons for participating in and helping to lead PCW’s supply chain work, both of which stem from Greater Cincinnati’s extremely tight labor market. First, she is eager to have access to the kinds of high-energy, committed employees who are a good fit for Legion. And, second, she appreciates that the economic well-being of the broader region is essential to the continued health and welfare of communities throughout the area.

<sup>7</sup><http://jointhelegion.com/>



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