

# FROM COMPETITORS TO COLLEAGUES

## A Case Study of the Boston Healthcare Careers Consortium

By Karen Kahn and Navjeet Singh

Industry partnerships can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of a region's workforce development systems because they ensure that workers have opportunities to build skills that align with the needs of local employers. In fact, the CareerSTAT [Guide to Investing in Frontline Health Care Workers](#) identifies forming industry partnerships as a best practice. The Boston Healthcare Careers Consortium has been operating for nearly a decade and is recognized as the region's most important forum for highlighting the needs of healthcare employers and removing barriers to employment for the region's workforce. During that time, the highly successful industry partnership has been supported by the National Fund's regional workforce funders collaborative, SkillWorks, and the Boston Private Industry Council.

Nearly one in five jobs in Boston is in healthcare (18%), and the sector is vital to the local economy. Healthcare employers offer a route to economic stability for families all across the city, but only if workers have the right skills and credentials to meet employers' needs. That is the overarching goal of the Consortium: to align the education, training, and workforce systems with employer needs. The Consortium envisions a workforce development system that ensures job seekers can find quality, career-oriented jobs and employers can find and develop the skilled workforce they need to deliver quality healthcare services.

Consortium leaders attribute much of the success of the partnership to the participants—who are the same people doing the work in their organizations—making relevant decisions that impact them directly. As colleagues with a deep respect for one another, they have built a highly effective learning community. "It's a genuine opportunity to gain experience and wisdom from professional colleagues," said Kristin Driscoll, workforce development manager at Boston Children's Hospital and a current co-chair of the Consortium.



### BOSTON HEALTHCARE CAREERS CONSORTIUM

The Boston Healthcare Careers Consortium boasts a robust membership:

- > All of Boston's major hospitals
- > Community and workforce partners
  - Nonprofits
  - City and local government
  - One-stop career centers
- > Two- and four-year colleges
- > Massachusetts Department of Higher Education

A total of 40-50 organizations participate with an average of 70 people attending quarterly meetings.

Currently, the Consortium is supported by a half-time staff person at the Boston Private Industry Council (the local Workforce Development Board).

The origin of the Consortium goes back to the early 2000s, when the Boston Foundation funded an allied health training initiative that involved grants to three major Boston healthcare employers: Partners HealthCare, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, and Boston Medical Center. The grants provided a unique opportunity for these competitor organizations to share what was and wasn't working in their projects and the workforce development system. This began a journey that turned competitors into colleagues and friends, working together to solve healthcare workforce challenges.

# Key Activities and Accomplishments

## Mapping the System

One of the Consortium's first activities was to map Boston's workforce development system. With the support of the Private Industry Council staff, the group identified the city's healthcare employers, high vacancy occupations, and local academic, employer, public and industry training programs. The Consortium also profiled the local workforce. This work provided an early success through which the partners built trust, developed a shared understanding of the workforce system, and began to set goals.

## Researching Education and Training Pathways

The Consortium was established with initial funding from the Commonwealth Corporation, a quasi-public workforce development agency, to the Private Industry Council. A goal of that original funding was to better align the system to help adult learners overcome barriers and find jobs in healthcare. To that end, the Consortium put together a report, [\*Critical Collaboration: Improving Education & Training Pathways to Careers in Health Care\*](#). This report outlined very specifically the ways that the current education and training system was not optimally aligned to help job seekers connect to careers in healthcare. The report made a set of 16 recommendations to better align employers, the education system, and the workforce system.

The report ruffled some feathers, and some Consortium leaders believe that it may have been too early to take on such a challenging issue. Joanne Pokaski, senior director of workforce development and community relations at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and the founding chair of the Consortium, said, "This work was important in moving a stuck conversation forward by clarifying specifically the ways our systems were not aligned."

## Examining Barriers to Success

*Critical Collaboration* laid the groundwork for a 2012 pilot study of three community colleges and two hospital systems who tracked two years of data on the placement of community college graduates in healthcare positions. The goal was to deepen understanding of who completed training and found employment. Participants discovered there was insufficient support for the data collection to answer core questions concerning barriers and success. In [\*From Classroom to Employment: Who Is Hired in Boston's Healthcare Sector\*](#), the Consortium recommended that the state not only incentivize data collection on job placement, but also create a portal where consumers could access this information.

An additional pilot study looked at whether providing learners with wrap-around job readiness services increased their chances of successful employment. Two community colleges offering training for four occupations—surgical technician, medical assistant, patient care technician, and phlebotomist—participated. Employers facilitated job readiness workshops, provided feedback on curricula, and communicated job vacancy data. The study tested the efficacy of more intense student support, while also building stronger relationships between the colleges and participating employers. The pilot program produced important learning around how additional services could produce higher placement rates for training programs.

## Building a Shared Agenda for a Tight Labor Market

The Consortium's research has contributed to a better understanding of the Boston workforce development landscape, strengthened relationships, and built a foundation for articulating a common agenda to address the current labor crisis. As the labor market began to shift in 2017, the Consortium updated its landscape study and re-examined some of its earlier recommendations to improve system alignment. It also addressed common challenges like retiring medical laboratory technicians and the need to diversify the nursing workforce. More recently, it has turned its focus to finding new workers, partnering with community-based organizations (CBOs) to recruit, train, and support the success of people who in a better labor market tend to be overlooked—for example, skilled immigrants or people with disabilities. Intentionally addressing diversity and inclusion, and making these issues integral to the work, has been particularly valuable to Consortium participants.

## The Value of the Consortium

In interviews and an informal survey of participants at a February 2019 meeting, we explored what brings so many people to the table and what keeps them coming back.

## Community of Practice

The Consortium has created an extremely valuable community of practice for all of its members. As Harneen Chernow, Massachusetts director of the 1199SEIU Training & Upgrading Fund, explained, "It creates a professional learning community that is very effective. We are all trying to deal with the challenge of how to manage this workforce, meet the needs of employers (which are constantly changing), and help workers maximize these opportunities." Chernow continued, "With so many people at the table—private nonprofits, workforce development organizations, post-secondary education, labor, academics—the conversation is rich. People bring connections and knowledge that you just can't get on your own. It has brought the whole field to another level."



## Collaborative Learning Environment

The collaborative learning environment keeps people returning to the table. Formal and informal information sharing builds a collective understanding of the workforce landscape. It is at this table that people learn about the current labor market conditions, regulatory information, emerging occupations, and best practices. For example, several participants pointed to a presentation on “recovery coaches,” an emerging occupation in the behavioral health field. Participating community and training organizations now have a clear understanding of the role and the skills needed to obtain this position, so they can align their services to better assist job candidates.

As unemployment has reached record lows, the Consortium has been an important forum for learning about marginal labor pools that receive less attention when recruitment was easy. Presentations related to hiring people with criminal records or disabilities have been highly valued by employer participants. Beyond the learning, the Consortium provides employers with the opportunity to get to know the community organizations that have connections to those populations and who can fuel local hires.

## Informal Networking

Consortium participants also value the informal networking that builds relationships that pay off in multiple ways. For instance, at meetings, different stakeholders find one another to set up more formal conversations about potential initiatives. Though the Consortium does not run training programs, it is in this setting that an employer might approach a training provider about developing a program specifically to meet their needs.

For example Jewish Vocational Services heard through the Consortium that Spaulding Rehab in Cambridge needed certified nurse assistants. When Spaulding couldn't find a sufficient number of workers, JVS worked with Spaulding on a new strategy. JVS recruited a broader array of candidates, Spaulding increased wages, offered full-time schedules, and began paying for training. The result has been a steady stream of new employees attracted by the higher quality jobs.

In another example, a presentation by Partners Healthcare on hospital IT roles led to a conversation, and ultimately a partnership, with Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology. Partners IT advised Benjamin Franklin on their curriculum and provided internships for students.

# Lessons Learned: What Makes an Effective Partnership?

The Boston Healthcare Careers Consortium exemplifies several of the characteristics that the National Fund has identified as vital to a successful industry partnership: employer leadership, staffing by an intermediary, effective communication, and measurable results. The Consortium is supported by SkillWorks, the National Fund’s network partner in Boston.

## Employer Leadership

Right from the start, the Consortium has been employer led. “The employer champions drive the agenda,” says Marybeth Campbell, executive director of SkillWorks. Joanne Pokaski’s leadership, commitment, and passion have also contributed to the Consortium’s impact. As first chair, Pokaski prioritized relationships and made sure participants would always feel their time was “well spent.” She set a positive tone and, according to her colleagues, used her considerable facilitation skills to keep meetings on track.

Susan Buckey, director of healthcare and sector initiatives at JVS, explained that employer leadership is important for all participants. “My needs aren’t really important unless the employer needs it, too. We hear about their challenges and how that affects workers they are hiring. Recognizing their priorities helps our organization stay focused.”

## EMPLOYER BENEFITS

### *Build a Strong Peer Network*

- > Share best practices and innovative models for serving incumbent workers
- > Network with peers to get feedback and advice from those who have tackled similar issues

### *Collaborate with Education/CBO/ Workforce Systems*

- > Discuss current and projected labor market trends
- > Learn about training grant opportunities, conferences, training events, and professional development
- > Provide feedback to shape training programs and establish hiring pipelines that fit employer needs
- > Learn about new training programs where organizations can source talent
- > Share hiring preferences and vacancies to better understand the big picture and help training programs meet needs

## Dedicated Staffing Provided Through an Intermediary

The Consortium is chaired by hospital workforce development leaders, but is staffed by the Private Industry Council, with funding from SkillWorks for a half-time staff person. Without dedicated staff to manage meeting logistics, support the research and writing of reports, follow up on action items, and sustain relationships, the Consortium would not be able to maintain its level of effectiveness. Dedicated staffing support for an industry partnership might be seen as a luxury, but it is common among highly effective industry partnerships and is particularly valuable in a sector such as healthcare, which is facing a labor shortage.

## Communicates Key Information to Stakeholders

Building a shared understanding of the workforce development landscape has been highly valuable to all of the Consortium stakeholders. Participants also value having a forum that keeps them informed about the latest labor market trends, changes in leadership at public and private agencies, grant opportunities, and much more. In addition, the Consortium connects members to important resources.

## Produces Excellent Outcomes for Workers and Employers

The Consortium has not solved all of the Boston region's healthcare workforce issues, but convening this group has helped to target resources where they are most needed, to partner on training opportunities such as job readiness and English language skills, and to address shortages in occupations such as pharmacy and surgical technicians. At one time, employers might have looked to "steal" talent from one another, today they are working together to build a larger pool of candidates for everyone.

Laurie McCorry participated in the Consortium for many years in her position as associate dean of allied health at Bunker Hill Community College and the Consortium informed the college's strategy for its allied health programs. She noted that she was better able to assess the value of individual programs— eliminating, creating, and modifying them in response to employer needs. McCorry indicated that Bunker Hill programs for medical assistants, pharmacy and surgical technicians, and certified nursing assistants all benefitted from employer input.

The key to demonstrating results is carefully evaluating outcomes. Outcomes include not only job placements, but also measurable improvements in the knowledge and activities of the industry partnership itself.

Positive outcomes depend on remaining flexible and entrepreneurial, understanding employers' needs, and finding solutions. Although workforce development partners usually prioritize support for low wage and low skilled workers, employers may be focused on vacancies

## A Nationwide Network to Support Healthcare Workforce Investments

CareerSTAT is a network of healthcare leaders promoting investment in the skills and careers of frontline workers. An employer-led initiative of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, CareerSTAT supports healthcare organizations in using workforce development programs to increase business impact, improve health outcomes, and provide good jobs. CareerSTAT promotes innovative practices and policies for advancing frontline workers, produces an array of resources on the benefits of skill and career development, recognizes organizations leading the industry as Frontline Healthcare Worker Champions, and supports organizations developing investment programs.

These members of the Boston Healthcare Careers Consortium have been recognized as CareerSTAT Frontline Healthcare Worker Champions:

- > [Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center](#)
- > [Partners Healthcare](#)
- > [Boston Children's Hospital](#)

in middle skill occupations. The solution to the middle skill problem might be better pathways for incumbent workers, which in turn would create openings for entry level workers.

It's also important to be realistic. "The pathway from [certified nursing assistant] to nurse is very long and offers few, if any, intermediate steps," explained Alysia Ordway, a former Consortium staffer. "In an environment where hospitals are requiring [a bachelor's degree], it's a steep learning and credentialing curve." Success should not be defined by trying to achieve an unrealistic goal, Ordway suggested, but in defining a pathway that would give nursing assistants alternative opportunities to grow professionally while continuing to pursue a degree in nursing, if that is their goal.

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/// It benefits everyone when we can understand what qualities employers are looking for, beyond the job description: for example, calm demeanor under stress, professionalism, compassion, efficiency. It helps us recommend the right candidates. ///

– Susan Buckley, Jewish Vocational Service

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## The Path Forward

In the last few years, the Consortium has gone through some leadership, funding, and staff transitions that have presented new challenges, but the industry partnership remains strong.

Employers and other stakeholders remain actively engaged, pressing forward with new ideas and potential directions. In late 2017, the *Boston Globe* reported on racial disparities across the city, inspiring a dialogue about racial diversity and equity in hiring. According to Chernow, this was a rare and important conversation that opened hearts and minds to some of the deeper barriers that people of color and immigrant populations face in preparing for and finding employment. This conversation has created an opportunity for change. "We can help people become more intentional about equity and smarter about how to partner to overcome these barriers," said Ordway.

Now entering its second decade, the Consortium has become an influential force in shaping the regional workforce development system so that it can better meet the needs of Boston's healthcare employers and offer greater economic opportunity to the city's diverse workforce.

### Five Tips to Starting an Industry Partnership

1. Bring employers to the table first, others will follow
2. Build trust
3. Start with something noncontroversial such as mapping the system (not fixing it)
4. Invite participants who are doing the work and can make decisions regarding initiatives: a table of practitioners not CEOs
5. Grow slowly; a core of trusting relationships is essential to keep going

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TEL 202-223-8994 | [info@nationalfund.org](mailto:info@nationalfund.org)  
1250 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20036  
[WWW.NATIONALFUND.ORG](http://WWW.NATIONALFUND.ORG)