

PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES: IT TAKES A TEAM

By Mikaela Romero and Janice Urbanik

Introduction

Successful job quality initiatives require workforce collaboratives to develop a unique set of competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities) to build and sustain partnerships with employers and support them in their job redesign efforts. No single person or organization needs to hold all of these competencies; the role of the collaborative is to put together a team with the full range of knowledge, abilities, and skills. The team is inclusive of staff, consultants, workforce intermediaries, and stakeholder organizations such as labor-management councils and employer associations. Each brings different competencies to the table.

As the job quality initiatives unfolded between 2017 and 2019, the Job Quality Community of Practice (see next page) identified the following competencies as crucial to success:

- **Executive Influence Skills** – Knowledge and understanding of CEO and C-suite executive motivations as well as business strengths, challenges, and opportunities.
- **Business Skills** – Ability to understand core business strategy, read profit and loss statements, understand the market competition, and communicate a value proposition that business leaders can evaluate on their own terms.
- **Industry Operations Knowledge** – knowledge of how a business operates, its workflow, and common operational models in the industry, particularly in the context of how workforce design changes impact all aspects of the business and its product or service.
- **Organizational Design and Development** – Knowledge of ownership and management models, labor relations, career ladders in the industry, and workforce culture.
- **Talent Acquisition and Management** – Knowledge of standard HR policies and practices, including employee engagement strategies and assessments and industry compensation standards as well as how to use the [National Fund's job design frameworks](#) to identify opportunities for improving jobs.
- **Equity Mindset** – Understanding workforce demographics, the history and impact of long-standing social inequities, and how to build more inclusive workforce systems.
- **Systems Change Design Skills** – Knowledge of the elements of system redesign and how to build them explicitly into project plans captured in a Memorandum of Understanding.

Job Quality Initiatives

Between 2017 and 2019, the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, with its network of regional workforce funder collaboratives, launched 11 job quality initiatives to test how employers can introduce, change, and leverage business practices to make jobs better and foster positive outcomes for both frontline workers and businesses.

To document the learning from the quality jobs initiatives, the National Fund published this series of four job quality reports:

- [Making Jobs Better: Executive Summary](#)
- [Co-Investment: Strategies for Resourcing Job Quality Initiatives](#)
- **Practitioner Competencies: It Takes a Team**
- [Employer Readiness: What Makes a Good Partner](#)

In 2019, the National Fund adopted a new framework, organizing our work around [five core solutions](#). One of those solutions is to make jobs better, which reflects the growing interest in and importance of job quality. This is also embedded in the National Fund's five-year priorities and continues to inform our strategic thinking as we confront the challenges of COVID-19 and the economic and racial justice crises of 2020.

- **Systems Change Implementation Skills** – Ability to communicate value of the collaborative and facilitate engagement among all stakeholders.

These competencies comprise the [National Fund competency model](#), a tool developed by the community of practice to guide collaboratives in hiring and developing staff and choosing workforce practitioner partners.

The competency model addresses all competencies; however, in this paper, we review the first three competencies — executive influence skills, business skills, and industry operations knowledge — which proved to be most important to the collaboratives as they embarked on their job quality initiatives.

Construction

Baltimore Workforce Funders Collaborative

Worked with the intermediary Civic Works to improve training and career pathways for incumbent workers in the solar installation and energy efficiency sector.

Atlanta CareerRise

Partnered with construction companies Astra and DPR to develop training programs and career pathways for their frontline workers.

Milwaukee Area Workforce Funding Alliance

Partnered with the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership to engage employers and unions in addressing the disproportionately high drop-out rates for women and people of color in construction apprenticeship programs and careers.

Food Processing

Incourage (Central Wisconsin)

Partnered with Mariani Packing Co. to improve recruitment and retention by developing a skills-based career ladder with clear wage progressions.

Manufacturing

Partners for a Competitive Workforce (Cincinnati)

Partnered with Richards Industries and Indy Honeycomb to improve communication, raise wages, and increase engagement of frontline workers.

Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas (Wichita)

Partnered with Cox Machine and XLT Ovens, two local manufacturers, to improve retention and strengthen the internal talent pipeline through upskilling and improved benefits.

Workforce Solutions Collaborative of Metro Hartford

Partnered with WepCo Plastics and several other manufacturers to improve employee satisfaction by introducing new training and learning opportunities and improving communication across the organization.

Chicagoland Workforce Funder Alliance

Focused on new training opportunities for frontline workers and their supervisors, and articulating career pathways to enhance advancement opportunities.

Healthcare

Pathways to Work (Dallas)

Partnered with three healthcare systems to improve job retention rates of patient care technicians and reduce vacancies.

SkillWorks Boston

Partnered with Spaulding Rehabilitation Network to improve recruitment and retention of certified nursing assistants and pharmacy technicians, with The Boston Home to evaluate the impact of a new long-term care universal worker position; and, with burrito chain Boloco on company-sponsored professional development opportunities.

Work Train (Syracuse)

Partnered with healthcare employers to implement changes in the way entry-level workers are hired, supported, and provided opportunities to advance in their careers.

Lessons Learned

Relationship Building

Every business must be approached as a unique entity, with its own internal dynamics and external pressures. Business leaders are constantly facing disruptions and challenges, from personnel changes, to acquisitions, regulatory changes, marketplace shifts, global pandemics, and more. These are the issues that executives think about every day. To build deep and trusting relationships with employers, collaboratives reported they needed to understand these issues, to have a deep knowledge of the industry in which a business operated, and to speak the language of senior executives. They also needed to be flexible, to adjust to each employer's needs, culture, and leverage points.

Thus, to become a valued partner to an executive team, business skills and industry operations knowledge were foundational. To become an effective influencer, it's also critical to get to know the CEO and other executives and understand what's important to them. For instance, what will motivate a CEO to invest in job re-design? Is it measurable business results like customer acquisition or return on investment (ROI)? Is it cutting the cost of turnover or minimizing the risk of lost business? Is it having exclusive access to talent from a trusted partner? Is it peer pressure? Is corporate social responsibility or personal faith a motivator for addressing racial and gender equity? These insights helped collaboratives build relationships, tailor their messaging and interventions for specific employers, and overcome resistance.

Resistance to change is universal. Working through that resistance takes resilience and skill, as discussed in the National Fund's publication, [Appreciating Employer Resistance to Job Design Changes](#). One site leader described it this way, "I get the team to move one step forward, then I get kicked in the teeth. But I realize it isn't personal, so I keep moving forward."

A competency is a knowledge, skill, ability or other characteristic (e.g., trait, mindset, attitude), or a group of characteristics, which, when applied in the appropriate roles, help achieve desired results.

It can be even harder to overcome resistance and sustain change during an economic downturn. Improving jobs is never as urgent when labor is plentiful. The relationships that collaboratives build during tight labor markets are vital to convincing executives not to jettison practices that have built a more engaged and loyal workforce. If the collaborative has demonstrated its competency as a trusted advisor, employers are more apt to listen, no matter the state of the labor market.

Technical Assistance Capacity

Building relationships with executive leadership is vital to getting a quality jobs initiative off the ground. In the implementation phase, collaboratives are called upon to provide a range of resource-intensive technical assistance, which also draws upon business skills and industry expertise. These services may be provided by industry intermediaries, as they were in the Boston and Baltimore initiatives, where JVS Boston and Civic Works, respectively, provided a broad range of consulting and support services to the participating employers. The Cincinnati collaborative hired business consultants to conduct employee interviews, assess opportunities and obstacles to change, and to provide technical assistance to implement operational changes to training, communication, workflow, and more.

The Syracuse, Hartford, and Atlanta collaboratives followed a resource-intensive strategy that proved fruitful: placing a skilled and trusted job coach or retention specialist at the employer site. Having a knowledgeable, skilled job coach present to work with management and employees keeps momentum going, helps to align everyone's interests, and provides support for managing change at various levels of the organization.

Competencies in Action

The examples below illustrate the importance of the top three competencies (executive influence skills, business skills, industry knowledge) in motivating employers to participate in job quality initiatives and adapting them to fit a particular business and industry.

Executive Influence and Business Skills

Workforce intermediaries that work in partnership with collaboratives—e.g., Civic Works in Baltimore and JVS Boston—illustrate the value of approaching their partnerships as familiar business-to-business transactions. These intermediaries use the language of the business value proposition to firmly link job quality work to meeting business needs—i.e., recruiting and retaining a high-quality workforce that adds value by improving customer service, efficiency, or capacity. The employers were required to show they valued the services being offered by paying a fee or investing in frontline jobs with better wages and benefits and other structural changes before the intermediaries would provide access to customers, funding, technical assistance, or talent.

When a Hartford employer discovered that affordable housing was a major issue for employees and interfered with retention, the employer became invested in making jobs better. Another Hartford employer sought to improve employee satisfaction because he believed that more satisfied and engaged employees would add value and improve business results. It was effective to identify what the employer already saw as a need, and use that as fuel for change.

Executive Influence and Industry Operations Knowledge

CareerRise in Atlanta commissioned an industry association to survey construction employers. Because the industry association was respected by the employers, its findings—that employers rated the overall quality of jobs in their industry as fairly low—were deemed credible. This led to introspection and peer pressure among employers to improve job quality to help recruit and retain talent. The Chicago collaborative similarly worked with the Illinois Manufacturing Excellence Center, an intermediary with deep knowledge of manufacturing and credibility with employers, to be the primary technical assistance partner for implementing job redesign.

In Cincinnati, the CEO of Indy Honeycomb believed that manufacturing careers were the path to the middle class. His religious faith motivated him to commit to raising the wage floor to above the 200% of the poverty level and to creating a more equitable company culture. Partners for a Competitive Workforce used its expertise in manufacturing business operations to help the Indy Honeycomb select interventions that benefitted the employees while also increasing the company's overall competitiveness.

Looking Ahead

The National Fund continues to build the capacity of regional collaboratives across the network to tackle job quality. Through this work, the National Fund continues to learn about what motivates employers to invest in their workers and improve the quality of their jobs. As we enter a period of economic uncertainty, it will be even more important for collaboratives to strengthen their competency and capacity to influence employers to see the value of workforce investment. We must make jobs better to build a more equitable and prosperous future for workers, employers, and communities.

The National Fund for Workforce Solution's mission is to **collaborate with workers, employers and communities to advance a skilled workforce, promote good jobs, and invest in equitable outcomes**. As a network of 30+ regional communities across 25 states with over 80 active industry-led partnerships in many sectors, the National Fund tests and scales workforce development strategies through five integrated solutions. First, we **activate employers** to invest in the frontline workforce and **make jobs better** by adopting policies and practices that make them employers of choice. At the same time, the National Fund **equips workers for success** and works to **change systems** that get in the way of good jobs and career advancement opportunities for people of all backgrounds. Finally, the National Fund **co-invests for greater impact** with its partners to leverage philanthropic, government and business resources at the local and national level.



TEL 202-223-8994 | info@nationalfund.org
1250 Connecticut Ave NW # 200, Washington, DC 20036
WWW.NATIONALFUND.ORG