

# EMPLOYER READINESS: WHAT MAKES A GOOD PARTNER

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## Introduction

Finding the right employer partners is key to a successful job quality initiative. The best partners are those who exhibit a suite of characteristics we term “**readiness**” — **the capacity to change business practices, policies, and habits to improve jobs**. Readiness falls along a continuum, but the following conditions correlate with the capacity to implement a successful initiative:

- **Local ownership or a local leader with decision-making authority**
- **A healthy and stable core business**
- **An internal champion with strong influence within the organization**
- **A culture that valued frontline workers and invested in them as a strategy for both talent development and growing the business**
- **Clear and robust communication among executives, managers, and frontline workers that flowed up and down the hierarchy**

These characteristics alone, however, are not sufficient to drive sustainability. Ultimately, for new workforce practices to stick, they have to be part of a business strategy—not just a stand-alone project. Projects and initiatives come and go; frameworks and practices that are integrated into the business strategy receive the attention and resources they need to succeed. The best partners understand the commitment to change “is not just about attending a meeting,” as a workforce practitioner explained in the [Aspen Institute’s evaluation report](#) of a Chicago-based workforce initiative known as the Genesis Movement.

In this report, we explore how to identify and engage good partners ready to advance a job quality agenda.

## Lessons Learned

### **What Constitutes Readiness**

Multiple factors, described in detail below, contribute to employer readiness. Not all need to be present in a single employer, but workforce organizations can use these criteria to assess an employer’s readiness to commit to job quality improvements.

## 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.

## Local Ownership

The National Fund job quality initiatives reinforced a lesson learned from multiple workforce development initiatives over the last decade: Local ownership and authority to make decisions is critical to implementing and sustaining changes in practice. If local management must consult corporate headquarters on every decision, it is difficult to maintain the shared buy-in and motivation necessary to bring changes to fruition.

### 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.

### Healthy Business

A healthy, solid business makes a better partner in a job quality initiative than one that is either in crisis or experiencing explosive growth. When leaders are engaged with urgent challenges, it is difficult for them to see how employee advancement and empowerment strategies might make their business more resilient. But some small- and medium-sized businesses that developed employee engagement practices and invested in frontline workers before the COVID-19 pandemic are seeing results: they have been able to adopt new employee supports and move quickly to adapt to market shifts without laying off workers.

### Internal Champion

Employer organizations are more likely to succeed when they have an internal champion with strong formal or informal influence within the organization. This internal champion sees the value in investing in the frontline, takes ownership of job quality changes, and holds a positive and constructive relationship with workforce development partners. The champion values frontline employees, ensuring their voices and needs are heard during planning and implementation. Not only do internal champions ensure follow through, but they also take the lead in addressing internal resistance and supporting employees who are trying to manage changes to policies, systems, and habits.

### Commitment to Investing in Frontline Workers

Businesses with cultures that value and engage frontline workers, and recognize the need to develop their talent, are better geared for implementing new workforce and operational practices to improve frontline jobs. This commitment reflects an innovative business model, one that creates long-term value for all stakeholders — i.e., values both people and profits. Where the culture already exists, internal champions are more likely to have the support and resources they need to make jobs better, such as leadership buy-in, organizational flexibility to change systems and policies, a shared understanding of race and gender barriers, and worksite space for training, job coaching, and other frontline worker supports.

### Communication

Companies that made significant improvements in job quality communicated priorities effectively throughout the management chain to the frontline workers—and brought feedback from frontline workers up the management chain. Accessible and transparent communication channels allow for trust and relationship building, provide capacity to collect and use frontline worker input, and align knowledge and values across the organization, ultimately making job design changes more sustainable.

Where businesses do not have a strong record of frontline worker investment and engagement, they may still be open to exploring job redesign through a pilot project. This could mean collecting and using frontline worker input for the first time or working with workforce intermediary partners in new ways. Starting on that path is not easy, but it has been done.

## How to Determine Readiness and Cultivate Commitment

When looking for employers to engage in a job quality journey, collaboratives have considered employers that span a wide spectrum in terms of readiness. Making the right choice—i.e., finding employer partners open to change—requires engaging in the complex process of building relationships and trust. For that reason, collaboratives have found that it is better to leverage their direct experience with employers' leadership teams, priorities, capacities, challenges, and opportunities, rather than recruiting employer partners through a third-party referral. Collaboratives have to own the relationship to make sure employers are committed to the core purpose of job quality work.

Building a positive relationship with employers, while getting a sense of leadership inclinations, collecting data on the employer's workforce and frontline worker investments, and gauging their openness to outsiders' input on business and operational practices is a delicate balance for collaboratives. Success depends on respecting the employer's learning curve and adapting to the company's reality in terms of capacity, business priorities, organizational culture, and workforce development expertise. As we explain in [Practitioner Competencies: It Takes a Team](#), collaboratives need to cultivate a specific set of skills to handle the complexities of engaging employers to improve their jobs.

Collaboratives have used a range of tools and tactics to determine readiness and sustain employer commitment.

### Assessment Tools

The Baltimore and Boston collaboratives created employer assessment to provide guidance in selecting employer partners. They recommend considering multiple indicators, including wages and benefits, safety, career advancement opportunities, scheduling practices, equity and non-discrimination practices, and work-life balance policies.

The Wichita collaborative had deep relationships with the employers with whom they worked, and knew how visionary, committed, and capable their teams were. Cincinnati's Partners for a Competitive Workforce also chose to work with an employer known for its highly committed leadership team. A Hartford, Connecticut, workforce intermediary recommends researching employers ahead of time to assess whether the employer will make a good match for a job quality initiative. To build rapport and understand what the firm values, the intermediary recommended checking out the employer's website and LinkedIn page, and talking to industry partners that have worked with them in the past.

### Memoranda of Understanding

Once employer partners are on board, an MOU is a useful tool for identifying responsibilities and expectations around the work to be done, roles, data sharing, and more. The MOU ensures all parties share a common understanding.

The appropriate time to discuss the MOU with the employer may vary based upon the state of relationship development. The Milwaukee collaborative learned that they could not lead with the MOU when engaging employers in job quality work, even where relationships with employers were well established.

### Employer Cohorts

The Dallas, Cincinnati, Wichita, and Chicago collaboratives formed either employer cohorts or industry partnerships. These cohorts convene periodically, allowing employers to engage in peer learning, challenge and mentor each other, attract additional employers to the effort, and take more ownership of the job quality initiative. Cohorts help to reinforce the impact of job quality initiatives on employees and business competitiveness.

### Resistance

Employers are often resistant to engaging in job quality initiatives. They may not see the value of investing in workers they see as "unskilled" or "uncommitted" to the organization or perceive they don't have sufficient resources to commit. To address resistance, workforce practitioners need to understand the perspectives, assumptions, and behaviors of CEOs and other executives, and build trust by offering expertise that they perceive as valuable in meeting their business needs. (For more on understanding resistance and how to move through it, see [Appreciating Employer Resistance to Job Design Changes](#)).

An area of resistance that is particularly challenging is racial and gender equity. Business leaders are often uncomfortable talking about race and gender issues at their workplace, and therefore, organizational policies and practices reflect a lack of shared awareness and understanding of their impact. In Milwaukee, for example, the collaborative learned that employers perceive frontline job redesign as very different from training and other traditional workforce development strategies—add to that an equity lens and it all feels especially new to employers. The Milwaukee collaborative advises that workforce intermediaries be aware that they need to build a new type of relationship with employers, with new framing of objectives and services provided, and regular education about equity issues. Patience is also important. In Des Moines, where the National Fund collaborative Central Iowa Works has been working on job quality strategies under other funded initiatives, the relationship with a single employer had to be cultivated over three years. After starting with hiring fairs and related services, they eventually broached a constructive conversation about addressing equitable advancement opportunities and outcomes for employees of color and women in their company.

## Looking Forward

Many factors affect employers' readiness to redesign frontline jobs to solve workforce challenges and strengthen their overall business strategy. Critical factors discussed above include local ownership; an internal champion; a healthy and stable business; a culture that supports investing in frontline workers; and open, honest, and clear communication throughout the organization. Choosing the right partners can dramatically affect the long-term impact of a job quality initiative.

Workforce practitioners also need to build readiness by developing relationships with employers and cultivating them over time. This is particularly true when it comes to racial and gender equity. Employers need guidance to deepen their understanding of racial and gender inequities and how their workforce practices and policies may reinforce those inequities. Raising awareness is the first step toward recruitment and retention policies that are truly inclusive and offer everyone in a community a chance for a better job.

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.



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