

Demand-Driven Manufacturing Talent Pipelines

Engaging Employers to Benefit Job Seekers

Creating a demand-driven talent pipeline means embracing the idea that employers are the primary customer and that workforce development and training providers should do what is possible with the resources available to help employers obtain the talent they need. It also means deeply involving employers in the process.

Workforce organizations face a number of difficulties when trying to increase employer engagement, including the inability to overcome employer concerns about the qualifications of proposed candidates, the required time commitment, as well as the capacity and speed of training.¹ Small businesses—the majority of companies—often do not have resources to spare. Also, there are no one-size-fits-all approaches that workforce organizations can embrace to improve engagement with their local employers. However, successfully scaled demand-driven efforts can provide important lessons on how to engage employers to benefit individual job seekers and growing companies, and how to support a regional economy.

Public Policy Associates, Inc. conducted evaluations of two leading programs that successfully met workforce needs through strong partnerships with area employers.²

Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative

The Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative (MPI), implemented by the Connecticut Department of Labor and the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, responded to an imminent need by a major manufacturer. The MPI was designed to operate on a “pull system” approach—the supply of candidates was channeled into occupational training and employment in response to expressed employer needs.

This initiative brought together employers, community colleges, technical high schools, and other partners to design and deliver a rapid, multi-stage, results-oriented process. Candidates registered for the program through an online portal, were assessed using a customized tool developed with community college, employer, and workforce board input, and then directed to further training (basic or technical) based on the results of that assessment or into the hiring process if determined immediately ready-to-hire by the employer partners. Several occupation-specific, short-term, and intensive trainings were co-created by the employers and education partners, and classes were only delivered when openings existed. Participants received job offers contingent upon completion of the coursework, and graduates received a Pre-Apprenticeship Certification. Those not able to be served through the Pipeline, or not interested in or eligible for employment with the employer, were offered opportunities with other employers and/or assisted with job development through a labor exchange. Employers and participants expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the program.

Retooling America

Building on a long history of producing talent in and around Southside Virginia, Danville Community College’s (DCC) *Retooling America* program resulted in the expansion of a manufacturing talent pipeline and helped spur economic development



Common Characteristics of Successful Efforts

- Curricula deeply informed by employer input, with built-in opportunities for students to apply new learning.
- Broad job seeker & student outreach.
- Clear lines of distinction between training by providers and on-the-job learning.
- Sensitivity to job seekers and providers when designing and scheduling classes.
- Carefully sequenced assessments and training, with opportunities to improve readiness.
- Leveraged, sustained relationships.
- Regular communication across sectors, including needed adjustments.
- Addressing the need for instructors creatively.
- An “everybody wins” mindset and awareness of the regional economic implications of success among partners.
- The timely deployment of resources and delivery of results.

in and around its region. The effort involved designing and implementing a new curriculum for an integrated machining technology program that resulted in either an associate's degree or an industry-recognized certificate. A capstone course replicated a shop floor manufacturing environment to demonstrate how precision machining skills contribute to a final product. The machinery was donated by employers, along with raw materials and project ideas. DCC offered multiple points of entry and exit, and because employers were deeply engaged in the development of the program, many participants received offers of employment—sometimes before they completed the program. The effort was successful because it was able to mobilize leaders from across several industry sectors. A high degree of coordination and collaboration between DCC and local employers proved to be critical to both the program's success and employers' satisfaction with the quality of graduates.

Implications

Through the evaluation of these two programs, Public Policy Associates identified the following considerations and suggestions for workforce boards, educators, funders, and policymakers seeking to employ a demand-driven approach:

References

¹ Shayne Spaulding and Ananda Martin-Caughey, *The Goals and Dimensions of Employer Engagement in Workforce Development Programs* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, December 2015), <https://urbn.is/2ykifZd>; Colin Taylor, *Employer Engagement in the National Fund for Workforce Solutions* (Washington, DC: National Fund for Workforce Solutions, January 2011), accessed October 18, 2018, https://nationalfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/NFWS_EmployerEngagement_011111_0.pdf.

² These projects were funded by the Workforce Innovation Fund (Connecticut) and a Trade Adjustment Assistance for Community College and Career Training grant (Virginia). More information on these evaluations and their outcomes is available on the Public Policy Associates' website.

Questions for Consideration

- What current and emerging needs from employers will support economic growth in the geographic area? Is there a strategic plan to guide collaborative action?
- How well do current assessment and training capabilities meet demand? How can the response time to employers be improved?
- How are employers engaged in ways that encourage repeat conversations and garner their excitement about and commitment to working with education and workforce development providers?
- How can relationships, funding, and other resources be leveraged to support a more robust, more responsive long-term approach to meeting employer needs?
- What are a pipeline's expansion and contraction points that can be activated on short notice?

Suggestions for Practices and Policies

Have a long view of the pipeline but start acting on a short timeline. The long view gives intention to the actions of various partners, encourages silo-busting, and establishes key goals, but partners must act in pursuit of that long view quickly and incrementally to prove concept.

Use a business lens. Recognition that employers think and act differently than the public sector in many ways is critical to success. Base decisions on data, be time conscious, look at the status of progress systematically and often, and respond rapidly to needs for improvement. Investigate solutions to any barrier to progress, including policies or established organizational practices.

Go beyond classroom training. Consider alternative ways of connecting and supporting employers, such as providing incubator work and storage material space for partnering companies, especially those new to the area; host industry association events at the training facility; and build in multiple opportunities for employers to engage with students, within the classroom and beyond.

Plan for industry innovations. Talk with employers about industry trends and advances—such as cloud-based automation machining—and what will be required to develop programs that can help students acquire skills and credentials for those upcoming job opportunities.

Invest in and evaluate demand-driven models. Both of the cases highlighted in this brief benefited from grant funding and employer financial and in-kind support, as well as robust implementation and outcome evaluations.

Public Policy Associates, Inc. partners with the public, private, and nonprofit sectors at national, state, and local levels. We provide insights to help our clients make better decisions through rigorous, culturally responsive research, evaluation, and strategic consultation.