



FUTURE-FOCUSED WORKFORCE BOARD BEHAVIORS

How Workforce Boards Show the Way Toward the Future of Work

AT A GLANCE

Future-Focused Workforce Leaders Excel in Today's Rapidly Changing World.

AUTHORS

Josh Copus

Director

JFF

Veronica Buckwalter

Associate Director

JFF

JANUARY 2020



Preparing Americans for the future of work is the defining domestic issue of our time.

Automation and machine learning technologies outperform people in jobs that once paid family-supporting wages. Meanwhile, young people and adults must acquire the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed in work environments that may not yet exist. And on top of that, employers and workers are increasingly using digital platforms to find and assess talent.

These realities are creating new compacts between workers and businesses, and they are prompting workforce boards and other workforce development organizations to adapt and expand the roles they play in preparing people for future learning and work opportunities.

In response to the emergence of a new age of work and learning, the [National Association of Workforce Boards](#) (NAWB) and JFF [launched](#) AWAKE (the Advanced Workforce Analytics and Knowledge Exchange). One of [JFF Labs'](#) inaugural initiatives, AWAKE's goal is to call attention to how workforce boards are evolving

and to examine how technology and data have shaped those adaptations.

While K-12 and postsecondary educational institutions play critical roles in helping to prepare the next generation of workers for success, local workforce boards and American Job Centers (AJC) are finding innovative ways to respond to the new realities of today's dynamic economy. In some cases, future-focused organizations within the workforce system have been able to stay ahead of the curve to meet the diverse needs of workers and emerging industries.

Workforce boards have been increasingly characterized by their unique identities, the niche labor market challenges they face, and the diverse and varying community organizations they partner with to advance regional workforce and economic development. They have also expanded their abilities to pursue a wider array of community-improvement goals and have established new and varied performance indicators to measure success.



Why Workforce Boards Can Lead in the Future of Work

The nation's 550 local workforce boards and 2,500 AJCs are in a prime position to drive impact at scale. They comprise a locally-driven system that provides public- and private-sector leaders with opportunities to design programs and allocate funding to meet the specific needs of their regional labor markets, which can vary greatly from state to state and even from county to county. AJCs, which are managed by workforce boards, are accessible to all and provide critical access points for people in underserved communities. Millions of Americans visit these centers to use digital tools for job searches, get career navigation advice, and participate in seminars to improve their skills.

These organizations are responsive, comprehensive, and effective sources of support for workers navigating complex challenges and preparing for the jobs of the future.

Across the country, future-focused workforce boards are adapting their operations, strategies, technologies, and investments to the changing world of work through strategic partnerships committed to making an impact in their communities. For some workforce boards, systemic, structural, and regulatory challenges prevent or limit their ability to adapt. If these challenges are resolved, these organizations could provide greater economic stability for people and improved talent pipelines for businesses.



The Challenges and the Opportunities

We conducted interviews with 35 workforce leaders representing 26 workforce organizations in 16 states and identified successes and growth opportunities. This effort chronicled the cultural and technological evolution of workforce boards across the country, focusing on emerging operating models, shared values, alternative metrics of success, and the use of technology and data systems, both internally and in customer-facing applications.

What emerged were four core challenges and four corresponding opportunities that workforce systems can use to prepare for the future and help their organizations and their communities respond to change. The pages that follow provide a more detailed look at those challenges and opportunities.

Transformative Technology at Scale



CHALLENGE

No two workforce development boards are the same, and they know little about the technologies, tools, and tactics that others are using. The lack of a comprehensive knowledge exchange across the workforce system is limiting the uptake of new tools and technologies.



OPPORTUNITY

Some workforce boards are applying new tools and technologies to improve their business processes, increase organizational efficiency, and enhance experiences for their customers.



POTENTIAL

Workforce boards that gain greater insight into technologies that are effective and then make targeted investments to improve information sharing can learn from and apply one another's solutions and avoid costly technology pitfalls.

The Challenges and the Opportunities

Data Collection and Analysis



CHALLENGE

Workforce development boards need to use data more broadly to devise more effective regional strategies and improve service delivery. In many locales, regional data sources go untapped because there is no unified framework for data extraction, aggregation, and analysis. Leaders at all levels struggle to parse state and national statistics in search of more nuanced views of regional labor market dynamics, education and training outcomes, and the shifting needs of learners and workers.



OPPORTUNITY

Many workforce organizations have research specialists who collect and use valuable localized data across a variety of digital platforms. Some organizations are beginning to build robust in-house research and data analytics tools. And workforce boards are increasingly making data available to training providers and community-based organizations in their regions.



POTENTIAL

Workforce board employees and data analysts are well positioned to understand emerging issues. They can use data to glean insights that help investors and technologists make decisions as they fund and build new tools. Workforce boards need to engage in a sustained national effort to identify a common data framework, create standardized views of aggregated data, and improve data services.

The Challenges and the Opportunities

Expanding Impact: Partnerships and Streamlined Service



CHALLENGE

Misaligned funding and accountability measures make it challenging for partners to streamline delivery of services and compare performance metrics in a meaningful way.



OPPORTUNITY

The workforce system is much more than a collection of programs supported by federal and state funds. In the past, workforce boards might have been solely defined by public funding streams and federal accountability measures. Today, they are not. Workforce boards are pursuing more ambitious goals that seek to redefine how people interact with the workforce system. They're harnessing the complementary goals of community stakeholders, creating new financing mechanisms, and working with partners in the private sector, particularly businesses that are developing new job and employment technologies.



POTENTIAL

Future-focused workforce boards can inspire organizations in their communities and instill confidence in those willing to change. The opportunity to fail is a privilege rarely afforded to public systems, but there is no reward without risk. Funders should place flexible bets on workforce boards that have expansive visions by supporting them when they fail and amplifying their innovations when they succeed. Private investors back capacity and technology infrastructure, and they double down on proven and trusted leaders. Public-sector investment should be approached in the same way.

The Challenges and the Opportunities

Human-Centered Policies, Procedures, and Products



CHALLENGE

Much of what is understood to be “technology” in the workforce system was designed for reporting, oversight, and assessing eligibility for funding. It was not designed to serve the real people who make up the typical workforce board’s clientele.



OPPORTUNITY

Many workforce boards are adopting policies and procedures that put people first and improving their use of technology to make information more accessible to all of their customers. They are finding ways to make processes less onerous, because they are recognizing that the people who come through their doors are often in need of much more than a job. They know that their customers are dealing with difficult circumstances and challenges, and they realize that they must respond with empathy, kindness, patience, and compassion. In the best cases, workforce professionals are finding ways to provide human-centered services in spite of cumbersome, antiquated hardware and software systems.



POTENTIAL

Workforce boards and AJCs are ideal proving grounds for iterative pilot tests of new and innovative consumer-facing tools and employment technologies. Workforce boards must encourage their AJC providers to experiment with new user-friendly tools that provide improved customer experiences and help people more easily access the resources they need in a timely fashion.

About Future-Focused Workforce Boards

In addition to clarifying the challenges and opportunities facing the workforce development system, AWAKE's interviews with workforce board leaders revealed a clear set of four behaviors and characteristics that define some of the country's most future-focused workforce organizations: **They seek out strategic opportunities to expand their influence, collect and analyze vast amounts of data, adopt human-centered policies and programs, and embrace new technologies.**

While strong individual leaders can play a role in determining how quickly and to what degree organizations adopt future-focused behaviors, top-down mandates are not required to make progress. New behaviors can take root organically within teams and across units.

Each of the behaviors on the next page are codependent and tightly interwoven with no single behavior serving as a prerequisite for any other. Teams should consider how each behavior is exhibited within the context of their organization and use each as a guide as they plan for the future.



Behaviors and Characteristics

Opportunity-Oriented

Imagining What Could Be, Not Accepting What Is

Future-focused workforce boards have expansive visions of what they can achieve, and they pursue the resources and talent necessary to meet ambitious goals. They are aware of strategic opportunities to expand their influence at all levels across a diverse set of stakeholders.



Data-Obsessed

Analyzing, Understanding, and Preparing for Change

Future-focused workforce boards collect and analyze vast amounts of data to stay in front of emerging developments throughout their organizations, among their partners and training providers, and within their communities.



Human-Centered

Putting People Before Procedures

Future-focused workforce boards promote policies, programs, and products that are designed and delivered in ways that prioritize positive user experiences. They are intent on meeting the needs of customers and strive to eradicate system limitations that hinder responsiveness.



Tech-Enabled

Using New Tools to Build Better Organizations

Future-focused workforce boards continually identify and embrace new technologies. They adopt and adapt new tools and techniques to ensure that their operations are efficient and effective.



Let's work together.

It's time to prepare for the future of work, and many workforce boards are doing that by aggressively pursuing greater efficiency, building better technologies, improving their approaches to data collection and analysis, and putting people at the center of everything they do.

Is your organization ready to meet the challenges of today and prepare for new challenges tomorrow?

Learn more at

[JFF.ORG/AWAKE](https://jff.org/awake) ▶



A photograph of a modern office desk. In the foreground, there's a laptop, a white mug, and some papers. In the background, a large computer monitor is visible, and on top of it, there are several small figurines and a small orchid plant. The background shows a blurred cityscape with tall buildings. The entire image has a semi-transparent red overlay in the center where the text is located.

“There are high expectations of us [as a national system] to adapt and expand our capabilities to meet the needs of today and tomorrow—While new strategy, strong partner connections, and increased awareness of our work helps advance the field, it will take the efforts of workforce organizations across the country to truly transform the sector.”

— Brooke Valle

Strategy Officer, San Diego Workforce Partnership, California



88 Broad St., 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110

122 C St., NW, Suite 280, Washington, DC 20001

505 14th St., Suite 340, Oakland, CA 94612

TEL 617.728.4446 **WEB** www.jff.org