



WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIP GUIDANCE TOOL

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INTRODUCTION

The National Fund for Workforce Solutions believes that high-quality workforce partnerships are among the most fundamentally sound strategies for helping low-wage workers succeed in today's competitive economy while at the same time improving the competitiveness of a group of employers from a particular industry sector. Successful partnerships combine an entrepreneurial approach to convening and organizing key stakeholders, disciplined organizational development, and persistent attention to the needs of their two main customers: employers and workers. This tool is designed to assist both regional funding collaboratives and the workforce partnerships they support. When a collaborative understands what constitutes a productive and well-functioning workforce partnership, it can communicate clearly to the partnerships what it expects of them. When a workforce partnership understands the collaborative's expectations, it has a better idea how to organize and support all of the necessary components of its work.

No single tool could possibly answer all the questions that arise from trying to describe this creative and complicated process. This tool is a start, and additional papers on specific topics will follow.



THE CORE OF WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIPS: UNIQUE INFORMATION AND INDISPENSABLE RELATIONSHIPS

At the heart of any successful partnership are a set of evolving relationships and the critical information they provide to workers, jobseekers, employers, and education/training providers. A high-quality partnership brings together employers, workers, and other key stakeholders from a selected industry sector into a regular and extended dialogue about that sector's particular characteristics, practices, and skill requirements. It creates a fertile exchange of insider knowledge by convincing participants that this structured conversation will yield value to all parties.

This ongoing communication of promising practices, ideas, and innovations within a structured setting among employers, workers, and key workforce stakeholders is one of the core attributes of workforce partnerships. It enables the other functions and services provided or brokered by them and it distinguishes them from other sectoral training programs. A high-quality workforce partnership develops relationships with, and among, its members that evolve and continue to yield critical analyses of the inner workings of a particular sector. Its longevity depends on the value it provides to all participants, particularly to workers and employers.

There are many ways for these relationships to develop. They may exist before a partnership's development based on previous outreach, programs, or initiatives. They may emerge from engaging a trade association. They could develop because of a desire to improve curricula, develop a new credential, or better prepare a group of hard-to-serve jobseekers. What is critical is that the relationships be valuable to all parties, be nurtured over time, and continue to yield new understanding of the sector and its participants.

THE ORGANIZER OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Workforce partnerships develop in various ways. Some may be seeded by funding collaboratives, while others may originate from employer interest. There is no simple formula to project the stages by which a partnership develops, but regardless of how and why they form, they need the services of an organizer at some point in their development. The organizer is a lead organization or individual that regularly convenes the leaders and participants of the partnership. It helps partners communicate their needs and challenges, works with employer and workers, education and training partners, and the public workforce development system to organize, align resources, and broker services.

When the impetus for a sectoral workforce partnership originates from employers who coalesce to address common challenges, a trade association or an affiliated employer organization may serve as the organizer. For a unionized sector, a labor-management partnership may serve in this role. In other instances, a well-established community-based organization—one that has the credibility and capacity to get buy-in from employers, workers, and the workforce development community alike—may be the perfect entity to start and sustain a partnership. For another industry, a community college might have the required capacity to understand, aggregate, and deliver the services needed to form and sustain the partnership, as long as employers do not feel constrained in their choice of training providers.

In some cases, the partnership may have an organizer from the start; in others, the funding collaborative may initially perform the organizer's functions (e.g., recruiting and convening employer and worker leadership; doing the initial research to understand workforce needs in a region). A funding collaborative may decide to retain this capacity in house or it may determine within the collaborative, based on local conditions, that another entity could be developed to allow the collaborative to assume the organizer's role.

An organizer that is dedicated to developing a high-quality workforce partnership will look for every opportunity to provide it with new information, research, and technology. There is a real advantage to having an organizer that can dedicate a substantial amount of time and energy to organizing the partnership. A good organizer generates information based on what employers and other partners bring back from industry trade shows, conferences, and corporate retreats. A good organizer sorts through the information put out by trade associations, universities, consultants, and economic developers about where an industry is headed, the latest game-changing technology, or a “best practice.” Most important, a good organizer knows that early and regular communication with key employers is crucial.

Each type of organizer brings unique strengths and perspectives; but all must develop other attributes in order to grow a high-performing workforce partnership. Organizers must become entrepreneurial and results-oriented; be industry-driven but have a dual customer focus, serving the needs of both employers and workers. They must generate employer and worker leadership early in the development of their partnerships and understand, aggregate, translate, and communicate needs and gaps. They must broker or provide the necessary services to address workforce needs, create and align the necessary resources needed to provide these services, and build systemic infrastructures that will ensure the sustainability of these services.

PROGRESSION OF WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIPS

Workforce partnerships start and live on a continuum of capacity and expertise. Some may be well-staffed and funded from the start and get a boost from the support of a funding collaborative. Others may require more intensive support; most workforce partnerships go through several stages of development and maturity.

Usually there is an initial preparatory stage in which the funding collaborative plays a key role. At this stage, the funding collaborative conducts the initial exploration to pick a sector in which to invest resources and build a partnership. This stage focuses on engaging employers and workers to understand the needs of the sector and gauge the interest of employers and workers in creating the partnership. It is also when the collaborative identifies the organization or individual with deep sectoral expertise that will serve as the organizer and manage the partnership.

This may be followed by a second phase where the partnership is fully formed and put into operation, with all partners recruited and administrative, fiscal, and other duties assigned to the organizer and other partners. Employer and worker leadership for the partnership is mobilized. The organizer takes on the functions of aligning resources, brokering agreements and services, and developing and implementing strategies and services for worker training and advancement.

In the third phase, the maturing partnership focuses on creating value for employers and workers, and on generating long-term changes to workforce development policies and systems.

THE GUIDANCE TOOL

This guidance tool illustrates effective strategies and operational activities associated with high-performing workforce partnerships. It is designed to be a benchmarking tool, laying out all that a workforce partnership should or could be doing. Workforce partnerships and their funders can use it to examine their activities and competencies in order to identify where additional development is needed to strengthen their ability to function.

THE TOOL IS ORGANIZED IN THREE PARTS:

Part 1: Organizing a workforce partnership is intended primarily for funding collaboratives, but a consultant or the organizer of the partnership identified by the collaborative will also find it useful. This section covers:

- Choosing a sector;
- Identifying an organizer and developing sectoral expertise; and
- Engaging employers and workers.

Part 2: Convening, operating and sustaining the partnership focuses on the functions and roles of the organizer. These are:

- Convening the full partnership;
- Ensuring employer and worker leadership;
- Accessing and aligning resources and brokering relationships; and
- Providing career services to workers.

Part 3: Achieving the goals of the partnership describes what an effective workforce partnership must do to meet its twin goals:

- Creating value for employers and workers; and
- Creating systems impact.

Each section discusses the function or strategy that leads to successful outcomes for employers, workers, and communities served and its importance to effective workforce partnerships. This is followed by a set of questions that illustrate some ideal practices associated with that function or strategy. Funding collaboratives and partnership organizers can use these questions to assess their own approaches and practices.



ATTRIBUTES AND STRATEGIES OF HIGH-PERFORMING WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIPS



PART 1: ORGANIZING A WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIP

CHOOSING A SECTOR

The process of starting and running a workforce partnership is multilayered, with many iterations and feedback loops. The tasks of understanding and choosing a sector, engaging employers in that sector, and identifying an organizer for a partnership with deep sectoral expertise are not sequential activities. Rather, one informs the other. This initial exploration can determine whether or not to organize a workforce partnership in a particular sector. The funding collaborative can use its own staff or delegate this exploration to a consultant or an organization that may go on to serve as the partnership's organizer.

Developing this knowledge requires going beyond surveys and secondary information to cultivate relationships with employers and workers early. The goals are to understand the inner workings of the sector and, more crucially, to determine whether employers and workers are interested in a partnership and can be engaged as participants and leaders.

As a funding collaborative explores whether to invest resources and focus its activities in a particular sector, it needs to understand that industry. What is important is that workforce professionals who seek to develop a strong workforce partnership—either in or outside of a funding collaborative—should concentrate on a particular set of employers that share similar markets, products, services, skill challenges, and retention issues. In other words, they should invest in a sector rather than apply resources to develop training services for a loose grouping of occupations or individual employers.

In most cases, the process of choosing a sector must be deliberate. Several factors can determine the choice of a sector: its size and scope; its composition; the opportunities for organizing employers in the sector; employers' interest in workforce development; and most important, the opportunities for entry-level workers. This last factor is critical: even if a sector meets other conditions, it may not offer low-income individuals opportunities to access jobs or advance in careers, a primary objective for the National Fund.

KEY QUESTIONS: CHOOSING A SECTOR

- What are the size and geographic scope of companies in the sector. What are the size, management, and organizational structure of its key employers?
- What is the composition of the sector's entry-level workforce?
- What major trends or developments affect jobs in the sector? Workers?
- How do workers access and advance through entry-level jobs in the sector?
- What is the potential for bringing together employers and workers in a partnership?

DEVELOPING SECTORAL EXPERTISE

It is difficult to invest wisely in the training and education of workers in a sector unless the workforce partnership, especially its organizer, thoroughly understands that sector. Therefore, at the same time as the funding collaborative makes its initial exploration of a sector, it must begin the work of identifying the organizer that will manage the partnership. Where an organizer—individual or institutional—already exists, the work of exploring and deepening knowledge of the sector can be pushed along faster.

Today's ever-evolving, technology-based economy requires sector specialization, peer learning, research, and analysis. The best workforce partnerships and their organizers provide the now and the tomorrow of their sector: the employers and the jobs; the workforce; the education and training systems that serve the sector; and the relevant policies and institutional factors. They can describe major trends; they can predict changes in skill sets, describe emerging occupations, and suggest new career paths. They use both primary and secondary resources to understand their sector.

A good analysis is a powerful tool for convincing industry leaders that the partnership provides critical information. Although many business consultants also perform this function, the partnership becomes the one place where this new information is shared and discussed among peers and competitors. Because of this, many employers want to participate in that exchange.

Finding an organizer with knowledge of the sector, or the potential to develop that expertise, is one of the most important tasks for a funder collaborative preparing to invest in a workforce partnership. Many factors determine which type of organization is best equipped to serve as the organizer, but a collaborative's primary method is to test the depth and breadth of the organizer's sectoral expertise. The funding collaborative itself does not need to have all the answers about the detailed workings of a sector—that responsibility ultimately resides with the organizer—but it can provide the initial impetus and lay out what it expects an organizer to know.

KEY QUESTIONS: DEVELOPING SECTORAL EXPERTISE

- What are the job requirements, skills, competencies, education, training, and certification requirements for entry-level and mid-level jobs in the sector?
- What are the occupational linkages and career pathways for advancement among entry-level and mid-level jobs in the sector?
- What barriers do workers face in accessing and retaining jobs in the sector (e.g., transportation, barriers)?
- What training and education delivery systems serve the sector? What are employers' opinions and utilization of local training and workforce development services?
- What are the gaps between what employers and workers need and what the workforce development system can provide?
- What key policies affect workforce development for the sector?



ENGAGING EMPLOYERS AND WORKERS

Connecting with employers or key employers in a large sector during the early stage of research and investigation is a key function of the funding collaborative or the organizer if one has been identified. Without the early and active involvement of employers, it is almost impossible to determine whether a partnership is needed and feasible—or if it is possible to get the employer buy-in and leadership necessary for the partnership to succeed. And although there must be early and persistent effort to identify and engage worker leadership as well, a workforce partnership will rarely succeed or become truly industry-driven unless employers commit to and invest in it.

This process of bringing together an initial group of employers while getting to know the sector and the viability of a workforce partnership in it can be tricky—but it is vital. It requires study and analysis. It may take scores of interviews. It may require speaking to multiple people at the same company. Sometimes a firm that one expects to be interested is not. Sometimes one finds a great leader in a very small company. Sometimes one has to find creative ways just to get a phone call returned.

A good organizer asks many questions and then listens carefully. A good organizer gets employers to open up about their workforce challenges, although it may require listening to other issues that are more immediate: lack of orders; technology snafus; rising utility costs. A good organizer knows enough about the industry to ask smart follow-up questions and uncover workforce issues embedded in these other challenges.

This early engagement of employers, if done well, can bring enormous efficiencies to the partnership later: the organizer will have already got the buy-in from one of the two most important partners in a workforce partnership.

This early engagement has to be followed by a second process: determining how to engage different employers. This is critical as well. Are particular employers willing to be engaged as participants or even as potential leaders? As the partnership coalesces and formalizes, securing these investments and commitments becomes a key task of the organizer. But the work of gauging how employers can contribute to the partnership must start early.

Finally, employer participation must be balanced with leaders who will bring workers' needs and barriers to the table. Some of the strategies involved in engaging employers must be applied toward workers' representatives as well. If the workforce is not organized, the funding collaborative or the organizer has to identify the leadership that can best represent the needs of workers. To see how workers can be brought to the table, the funding collaborative or the organizer must find out where workers congregate and what community agencies serve them.

KEY QUESTIONS: ENGAGING EMPLOYERS AND WORKERS

- Can you identify and recruit appropriate decision makers from employer partners and workers' representatives to provide workforce information and lead the partnership?
- Does your partnership's organization reflect the dual leadership of employer partners and workers?
- Are employers and workers ready to be active in the planning process and project design?
- What resources will employers commit to the partnership?



PART 2: CONVENING, OPERATING, AND SUSTAINING THE PARTNERSHIP

CONVENING THE FULL PARTNERSHIP

The initial goal of convening and organizing the partners is to get the employers talking, not to show them that there is a training solution to every challenge they describe. The result of a good first or second meeting is often that the employers choose to go back to their firm or organization and get additional information. The right questions will help the attendees realize they should take a second look at the assumption that they have little in common with other members of the sector.

Once a core group of interested employers of the sector is identified, bringing and keeping them together requires careful planning. Many employers believe their problems are unique, not shared by any other employer. They may be deeply skeptical of an aggregated training process. They may have limited time to participate in the partnership. For these reasons, the meeting should be organized to give the employer representatives a comfortable and relaxed setting where the organizer can draw out common challenges among the attendees. Ideally, a respected employer should run the meeting, one who is not only intrigued by the possibilities of partnership but also has a good idea what his peers are thinking.

After the initial group of employers is engaged, the work of convening and organizing other stakeholders can begin. Although representation from certain key partners—training education providers, local or state agencies involved in workforce development, major CBOs serving the workers, local funders—is imperative, knowing when to bring in non-employers/workers is critical. A rapid expansion of the partnership that detracts from employer leadership will likely lead to deterioration in the quality of the sector information being provided.

It is difficult enough to get employers to open up among their peers; it is even more challenging when they are surrounded by training providers, CBO staff, or academics who insist they know exactly what employers need. One of the first steps in convening the full partnership is getting employers comfortable and setting the stage for an exchange on the needs in the sector and the capacity of trainers and workforce development entities to meet those needs. Employers may reveal their disenchantment with the status quo and the need for new training systems. Education providers may discuss their frustrations with public policies for funding workforce development. A key function of the organizer is to facilitate this dialogue while creating respect for the role of each partner and common ground among them all. Only when this is done can duties, roles, and responsibilities be distributed among different partners and a full partnership go into operation.

KEY QUESTIONS: CONVENING THE FULL PARTNERSHIP

- Have you identified all the key partners for a sectoral workforce partnership, including major or growing employers in the sector, education and training providers, Workforce Investment Boards, unions, and community-based organizations?
- Do you convene the partners regularly in ways that allow them to exchange and disseminate information, discuss challenges, and work together to propose solutions?
- Can you get partners to identify common challenges and needs?
- Can you get partners to understand and respect one another's roles in the partnership?

ENSURING EMPLOYER AND WORKER LEADERSHIP

Different approaches may be required for different employers in a sector partnership to determine the roles each can play and the investments or commitments each is willing to make to the partnership. Some may want to serve in an advisory capacity only. Others may commit equipment, cash, or other resources toward the partnership, while a few may want to engage in a leadership capacity.

The organizer works with employers to help them understand what they must do for the partnership to be effective: they have to identify desired goals and outcomes; communicate expectations and provide honest feedback; provide the organizer access to information about the sector; and collaborate with other employers to leverage sector-wide resources and invest in data collection and reporting. In most cases, the organizer provides initial ideas, suggestions, and advice. The organizer might work with a small subset of the leadership to schedule meetings, prepare agendas, and prepare reports; but in the strongest partnerships, some employers and worker representatives take on leadership roles.

As leaders, they work with the organizer to help set outcomes and are committed to achieving them. They solicit training suggestions from the members, collectively define training needs, and determine which needs or actions have priority. They tap public and private resources to provide resources to address these training needs, solicit training proposals from a variety of providers, select a provider at a negotiated price, schedule the training, and evaluate its effectiveness.

KEY QUESTIONS:

ENSURING EMPLOYER AND WORKER LEADERSHIP

- Can you identify and recruit key representatives and appropriate decision makers from employers and workers to lead your partnership?
- Does your partnership's organization reflect the dual leadership of employer partners and workers?
- Are employers and worker representatives willing to make key decisions for the partnership, including clearly laying out common needs, challenges, and expected outcomes?
- Do you have strong relationships with these key partners to generate the necessary resources, investments, and commitments in your partnership?



ACCESSING AND ALIGNING RESOURCES AND BROKERING RELATIONSHIPS

Once a partnership is established, the organizer, with the help of the leadership, must bring together a wide variety of resources into a combination that addresses the needs of both employers and workers. This can be a daunting task as multiple public and private organizations respond with scores of programs, each with their own priorities, restrictions, and performance measures. Yet a good organizer is uniquely qualified for this mission. It understands the needs of both customers—workers and employers—and can use that knowledge to examine the opportunities for aligning funding streams or creatively redirecting resources to develop a customized approach.

At this point, the organizer must act as a translator, interpreter, and broker. Understanding and communicating the needs of employers and workers to each other, as well as to the training and education community, is a critical function. The organizer must also recognize what gaps exist in the workforce development system and the community infrastructure to meet those needs. It must communicate these limitations or capacity issues in the workforce development systems to employers and workers. It must organize and optimize whatever resources exist, yet be entrepreneurial in aligning resources and funding streams to fund needed activities.

Evaluating the quality of these resources is another important function. Workforce partnerships and their organizers need to make objective decisions about service providers and insist upon clear performance measures and accountability. Some of these decisions can be particularly uncomfortable if the provider is a member of the partnership.

Sometimes, pieces of valuable information can be obtained through individual interviews or surveys, but what cannot be obtained outside of a partnership is the rich dialogue that occurs as employers become more and more comfortable in describing their common challenges. Even more important, these conversations may generate ideas for addressing challenges shared by all employers. This can often be a turning point in the development of the partnership as individual employers realize that by acting together they not only solve some of their own human resources challenges but also build human capital for the industry.

Once needs and resources are identified and aligned, the workforce partnership must aggregate employer demand and worker skill needs to design common solutions and broker relationships among the partners. Brokering relationships among partners could take the form of: customized training with employer input from training providers in the partnership; preferred hiring from training providers in the partnership; internship programs with employer partners; or apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs run by unions. Brokering may also take the form of developing common curricula or skills standards for the sector or facilitating the portability of workers' experience and training across institutions and employers.

KEY QUESTIONS:

ACCESSING AND ALIGNING RESOURCES AND BROKERING RELATIONSHIPS

- Do you identify gaps between employers' and workers' needs and the capacity of the education and training system, or in public resources to meet those needs?
- Do you translate and communicate needs among different partners?
- Do you work with employers, training providers, and workers representatives to align training programs and services to promote career advancement within the sector?
- Do you identify multiple public workforce development funding streams to support training, career advancement, and other services for workers and employers?
- Do you broker agreements with and among partners?

PROVIDING CAREER SERVICES TO WORKERS

A key National Fund strategic principle is career advancement for low-wage workers. It is expected that all organizers and their partnerships will have a clear strategy for ensuring that incumbent workers and new hires have a good opportunity for higher wages, better benefits, and advancement. Even with a high-quality partnership in place, this is challenging. But it becomes almost impossible without a strong partnership that has solid employer relationships.

While most quality education/training providers understand the importance of training to employers, they do not see career advancement as their responsibility. However, if the organizer and the leadership understand the industry well, they can provide direction about the skills, certifications, and credentials that can open up opportunities for workers. By working closely with the industry and education providers, the organizer and the leadership might even develop new industry-recognized certifications that give incumbent workers a better chance for advancement and the jobseeker a greater chance to get hired.

Alternatively, if there is a significant gap between employers' needs and workers' skills, partners may suggest and help in the design of new on-ramp or bridge programs to help workers access those jobs. The organizer may convince employers to use career coaches who can help workers navigate the complex internal career ladder or lattice. Or it might determine that there are not enough "rungs" in a career pathway and convince employers to pilot new intermediate positions to help workers advance.

This is where good education and training partners become essential to the partnership. They design customized programs, provide flexible hours, rework curricula, and create new certifications to help workers. But workers often need more than just education and training services. They need holistic, wraparound services that help them address barriers to employment and advancement such as transportation or child care issues, or the need to balance life and work.

Service strategies must also differentiate among the needs of jobseekers, new hires, and incumbent workers. Because advancement of incumbent workers is a key goal of the National Fund, organizers must pay special attention to the needs of these workers.

KEY QUESTIONS: PROVIDING CAREER SERVICES TO WORKERS

- Do you provide or broker comprehensive assessments of worker skills, competencies, and barriers to retention and advancement?
- Do you provide or broker pre-employment services (e.g., training and coaching in soft skills; job search and placement support) for jobseekers and new hires?
- Do you provide or broker enriched adult basic education and college preparation courses and testing to incumbent workers?
- Do you provide or broker career coaching for incumbent workers?
- Do you assist workers in accessing public services and income supports, including financial aid?



PART 3: ACHIEVING THE GOALS OF A WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIP

CREATING VALUE FOR EMPLOYERS AND WORKERS

What is the benefit to employers and workers for participating in the partnership?

Ideally, employers will see the benefits of participation in tangible ways such as a better trained pool of job applicants and incumbent workers, and greater productivity as employees' skills become more aligned to their needs. They may see cost offsets from reduced turnover and increased productivity. They may get sector-specific credentials developed and more responsive education and training systems. Finally, they may develop new and enhanced relationships with their employees, as well as with other employers, education and training providers, etc.

Again, it is not really the mission or expertise of an employer to understand adult learning styles or the myriad other challenges that affect the ability of incumbent workers to take advantage of career advancement opportunities. It is revealing how frequently employers are surprised that their entry-level workers—often very successful workers—lack the requisite reading, writing, or study skills for college-level training. One of the most valuable contributions that a workforce partnership can make is to help employers leverage the expertise of the workforce development system to develop the skills of low-skilled adults.

The commitment to adding value for employers requires a similar dedication to understanding incumbent workers and the challenges they face:

- Figuring out what is needed for career advancement;
- Understanding what family sacrifices may be necessary to pay for additional education; and
- Balancing work, commuting, children's education, and other family obligations.

As employers better understand these challenges, they can help employees address them by, for instance, adopting new human resources practices or designing new work systems and policies that encourage career advancement.

Changing the behavior of employers is one of the most difficult assignments for a workforce partnership but also one of the most satisfying. This is addressed in the next section, "Creating Systems Impact."

KEY QUESTIONS: CREATING VALUE FOR EMPLOYERS AND WORKERS

- Do you assist employers in identifying and understanding the challenges they are experiencing in hiring, retaining, and advancing workers?
- Do you assist employers with services that are customized to their specific needs and corporate practices, and are designed to help them improve their productivity and bottom lines?
- Do you assist employers in accessing public workforce development and other resources?
- Do you provide new and incumbent workers with well-rounded services that address barriers to education, employment, and advancement?
- Do you work with employers to design or develop new or improved career pathways that make advancement more accessible to incumbent workers?

CREATING SYSTEMS IMPACT

Workforce partnerships that produce results can serve as catalysts for improving sector-wide practices, local workforce development systems, and public policy. The National Fund expects that at some point, a workforce partnership will attempt to change and improve not just members' or affiliates' practices and strategies around workforce development, but that it also will attempt to make those changes sector-wide. It will try to change how the public workforce system works and advocate for changes to local or state policies that affect workforce development and industry competitiveness in that sector. This growing influence is part of the systems impact function of a workforce partnership designed to create sector-wide practices and build the local or regional infrastructure. This helps assure the sustainability of the changes the partnership brings about. It takes time and occurs as a workforce partnership matures and evolves.

A strong workforce partnership can attempt to generate systems impact at one or more levels. At the level of the partnership, it can influence changes in workforce practices among its employer partners by introducing new ways of hiring, training, and retaining employees or by scaling up the innovations or best practices of one or more employers across the partnership. For instance, it can work with health care employers to create intermediate positions in a nursing career ladder for certified nursing assistants or to replicate tuition policy started by one hospital.

A workforce partnership also can help employers design new career ladders for their workers. At the level of the partnership, it can also affect how service providers deliver customized education and training services to the employer partners through joint training that is based on employers' input.

It can be challenging to change employer practices that are inimical to the hiring, retention, or advancement of low-wage workers and then to replicate the changed practices among employers in the sector. Yet it is one most effective ways to improve outcomes for workers—and a National Fund priority. Here again, the relationships developed in the partnership are most helpful. For example, a partnership may decide that the best way to address a particularly knotty problem is to invite a peer company to present a case study of how it addressed that issue. Another good example is the use of return-on-investment models where a training director or vice president for human resources has had to make the case to the chief financial officer in starkly quantitative terms. If the numbers work, the selling of a reorganized approach to training and education can be powerful. Resistance to change will often be mitigated when enough examples show that others are doing things differently and that this is improving bottom lines.

KEY QUESTIONS: CREATING SYSTEMS IMPACT

- Do the strategies and services of the partnership alter employer human resources practices and policies in ways that help workers while improving employers' systems and practices?
- Do you work with employers and partners to develop new skill standards or new training and education capacity?
- Do you document and disseminate best practices among employers across the partnership or in a sector?
- Do you use data and documentation, including ROI analyses, to get buy-in for program expansion from employers, funders, policymakers, and other stakeholders?
- Do you actively work to build strong connections with the public workforce system for employers and unions?
- Do you advocate for changes to policies affecting workforce development at the local or state level?

Good employer practices disseminated within a partnership can be applied sector-wide as other employers join the partnership or as it establishes certain practices as the norm through the help of an industry or trade association. At this level, the creation of new skill standards or industry-recognized credentials, the development of new curricula, or the establishment of community college centers of excellence dedicated to a particular industry serve as evidence of systems impact.

Changing the way the public workforce development serves sectors is another potential level of systems impact. A major service that a partnership can provide the public workforce development system is to help it understand and recognize the limitations of existing programs and policies, and then to increase its capacity to respond to the needs of employers and workers.

This may involve advocating for specific policy changes that affect industrial competitiveness. It may lead to the removal of restrictions or the creation of additional resources and supports for workers. For instance, eligibility restrictions in public programs may be eased to increase workers' access to public funds for training. Or it may change the way employers and public agencies interact. Or it could involve getting public workforce agencies to work with one another to improve services for workers and employers in new ways.

For this to happen, the workforce system must be engaged early on and helped to see the workforce partnership as a complement to the system—not a competitor. To do that, a good workforce partnership has to work with receptive mayors, economic developers, community college presidents, technical school principals, WIB directors, and chambers of commerce. The key to these relationships is bringing to the table employers and workers who know their industry sectors. In most cases, their unique perspectives can help policymakers see where particular reforms could improve the system for both customers.



CONCLUSION

The characteristics and strategies associated with high-performing workforce partnerships laid out here represent the collective experience of, and evidence gathered by, the National Fund and its local affiliates. The Fund recognizes that not all workforce partnerships or funding collaboratives can immediately practice or carry out all the functions outlined in this tool, and that workforce partnerships, their collaboratives, and the local conditions in which they operate all vary considerably. This tool was created precisely to address this variation and give the efforts of workforce partnerships direction so that they and their funding collaboratives can move toward a higher level of effectiveness with better outcomes for workers, employers, and communities.

The Workforce Partnership Guidance Tool was prepared by consultant Radha Roy Biswas, Geri Scott, program director, and Fred Dedrick, executive director of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions. The tool draws on publications and internal documents of the National Fund, its partners, and its affiliates. Of particular note are the following:

- Baran, Barbara, et al. 2009. *Implementing the National Fund for Workforce Solutions: The Baseline Evaluation Report*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.
- The Jarrett Wagner Group. 2009. “Progression of a Workforce Development Collaboration.” Draft. August.
- The Jarrett Wagner Group. 2010. “What Employers Can Expect from Participating in a Workforce Partnership.” PowerPoint. June.
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- National Network of Sector Partners, the NGA Center for Best Practices, and the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce. 2008. *An Evaluation Framework for State Sector Strategies*. Washington, DC: Authors.
- National Fund for Workforce Solutions. 2008. “How Workforce Partnerships Promote Career Advancement Practice.” Webinar.

NATIONAL INVESTORS

The national investors provide seed money—\$23 million in commitments to date—to regions for building local approaches to job training and career development. The investors also support a comprehensive evaluation of initiative activities taking place across the country, technical assistance for local partnerships, and a dynamic “national learning community” that helps those partnerships share best practices and solve problems together.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Ford Foundation

The Harry and Jeanette
Weinberg Foundation

The Hitachi Foundation

U.S. Department of Labor

John S. and James L.
Knight Foundation

Microsoft Corporation

The Prudential Foundation

The Walmart Foundation

NATIONAL PARTNERS

Two national partners provide direct support to the regional collaboratives and workforce partnerships:

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE develops and leads the National Fund peer-learning strategies, coordinates technical assistance to the regional collaboratives and local partnerships, oversees the national evaluation, and provides fiscal and grants management.

THE COUNCIL ON FOUNDATIONS provides technical assistance and support to the National Fund’s regional funders, and uses its networks and leadership to engage the philanthropic community and public policymakers in efforts to develop a skilled workforce.

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