



SkillWorksSM
PARTNERS FOR A PRODUCTIVE WORKFORCE

SkillWorks Partnerships: Their Structure, Evolution, and Effect on Outcomes

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Introduction

The SkillWorks Initiative is built on the premise that intended outcomes, such as advancing low-skilled workers, increasing the capacity of the workforce development system, and meeting employers' needs for a trained workforce, would be accomplished more successfully in the context of collaborative relationships called workforce partnerships. Workforce partnerships allow individual organizations to engage in work that they would not have the capacity to do on their own; to access additional information and resources; and to engage in work that might be too risky to complete unilaterally. In other words, challenges facing workers and employers are complicated and require a multi-pronged problem-solving approach best served by a variety of organizations working in tandem.¹ Workforce partnerships alone, however, do not guarantee a program's success. The partnership structure is also relevant. For example, who is involved, why partners choose to participate, the leadership structure that is put in place; how activities are established, managed, and monitored; and how information is shared, are all potential factors that might contribute to a workforce partnership's ultimate success.

After five years of implementation, the Initiative's funders commissioned the evaluation team to assess how the funded partnerships were structured, how these structures evolved, and whether there were trends in the implementation that might suggest that particular structures are more likely to contribute to positive program outcomes. The first section of this report outlines the SkillWorks funders' intention for selecting the partnership model and the guidance they provided to grantees. The next section summarizes the workforce partnerships' implementation experiences, including goals, structures, and evolution. The final section discusses the study's findings and conclusions.

The information presented in this memo is based on written surveys and interviews completed with stakeholders from each of the funded partnerships (copies of the survey instruments and interview guide are included in Appendixes A and B). These two data sources provided a wealth of information about each partnership's implementation experience, including partners' views of partnership characteristics that facilitated or inhibited intended outcomes.

SkillWorks Initiative's Intent and Design of the Workforce Partnership Model

From the beginning, SkillWorks Initiative funders advocated a partnership model as the ideal structure for simultaneously meeting the needs of low-income workers and Boston area employers. The partnerships were billed as "the vehicle to engage employers and workforce development providers in working together to build a skilled entry-level workforce that is ready to respond to opportunities for advancement."² At the same time that SkillWorks was implementing a partnership approach to workforce development, similar structures were being piloted by other public-private initiatives across the country. These initiatives were also focused on funding partnership-driven, dual-customer workforce development efforts.³

All of these various initiatives were consistently advocating a partnership structure because workforce partnerships were believed to be more effective than individual workforce development service providers at:

- Assembling and promoting collaboration among relevant stakeholders

- Sharing the program investments and ownership among employers, public entities, and community-based organizations (CBOs)
- Emphasizing and balancing both demand and supply side considerations
- Building a foundation for expansion and sustainability of program elements developed

Increased effectiveness in these areas was expected to increase employer participation in and commitment to training for low-skilled entry-level workers, bring about system changes in the public workforce development system, and help avoid costly duplication of efforts among CBOs and/or training providers. It was not important that workforce partnership be a new or formal entity; what was important was the establishment of collaborative relationships established in order to provide a continuum of services to employers and low-income workers.

The SkillWorks initiative funded five workforce partnerships during the first two years of Phase 1. Table 1 provides specific details about each partnership including the start dates, lead partners, and partnership structure. For these workforce partnerships, the SkillWorks funders provided limited specific requirements related to a partnership’s structure or decisionmaking processes. The initial Workforce Partnership RFP required that partnerships “include at least one employer, one service provider, and employees.” It also asked partnerships to detail their structure and decisionmaking processes, but it did not prescribe the way partnerships should be structured nor the roles that specific stakeholders should play.

Table 1: Funded partnerships—Structures at start-up.⁴

Partnership Name	Start Date	Sector	Lead Partner(s)	# of Employer Partners	# of Training/ Coaching Partners	Total # of Partners
Building Services Career Pathway Project (BSCPP)	2005	Building Services	SEIU Local 615/ Voice and Future Fund	7	3	10
Health Care and Research Training Institute (HCRTI)	2004	Healthcare	Jamaica Plain NDC Fenway CDC	8	4	14
Hotel Career Center (HCC)	2004	Hospitality	International Institute of Boston	1 Hotel Chain - 2 Hotel properties	1	4
Partnership for Community and Workforce Development (PCWD)	2004	Healthcare	Partners HealthCare	1 Healthcare System – 3 Hospitals, 1 Health Center	7	12
Partnership for Automotive Career Education (PACE)	2005	Automotive	Asian American Civic Assoc. Urban League of Eastern Mass. La Alianza Hispana	3	2	8

Source: Interviews with partnership stakeholders, SkillWorks evaluation documents, partnership proposals to SkillWorks.

Documentation developed at the end of the first year of SkillWorks implementation provided more detail about the funders’ expectations for SkillWorks partnerships. Specifically, the partnerships were described as “collaborations that **organize** stakeholders and **capitalize** on their **comparative advantages**, including service providers, trainers, employers, organized labor, and institutions of higher education.” They were also to concentrate on “sectoral or occupational focus for partnership activities” and to “focus on both pre-employment/entry level jobs and incumbent workers in order to achieve advancement in skill areas needed by employers.”⁵

Even with this additional level of detail, partnerships had considerable opportunity to establish diverse collaborative structures—including the number of lead organizations, the number of employers, the breadth of employer needs to be addressed, methods for communication and decisionmaking, etc. Because the funders were not specific about the required partnership elements, each partnership created a structure that met its needs, its goals, and its interpretation of funders’ objectives. The implications of this diversity will be discussed in greater detail throughout the remainder of this report.

Partnerships’ Structure and Practices

An overview of the five SkillWorks partnerships funded within the first two years of Phase 1 is provided below.

Collaboration Formation

According to the initial SkillWorks RFP, workforce partnerships were to be established collaborations with existing experience delivering sector-based workforce development experience.⁶ In each partnership, organizations did have prior experience working together but the actual partnerships funded were new, in terms of either new partnership formations or new ways of interacting. For example, the International Institute of Boston (IIB) had worked with the Hilton Corporation previously on IIB’s pre-employment program but had never offered incumbent site-based services in collaboration. The Boston Healthcare and Research Training Institute (HCRTI), alternatively, had piloted an incumbent workforce training program with a few employers prior to SkillWorks. With SkillWorks funding, the network was increased and pre-employment services directly connected to employers were added.

Whether the workforce partnerships were pre-existing or fairly new at the time of SkillWorks funding, common factors did bring partners together in the form of partnerships. Service providers and employer partners were asked how important certain factors were in their decision to join their particular partnership:

- Over 70 percent of employers indicated an **alignment of their mission and/or values** with that of the partnership was *very important* to their decision to join; 100 percent of service providers indicated that this was *important* in their decision.
- Over 80 percent of employers and service providers said it was *important* that they **agreed with the planned approach** of the partnership.
- About 90 percent of employers and service providers saw the potential for **new workforce development funding** as at least *somewhat important*.

In terms of partnership goals, stakeholders within a given partnership consistently described the goals of their efforts. There were some individual variations in participant responses but these were not as striking as the similarities. The divergence, however, was visible when stakeholders were asked whether everyone had a similar vision for how to achieve the goals. Stakeholders would often describe a lack of consensus around exactly how to achieve the common goals. This is particularly interesting in light of the point above that most stakeholders, when joining a workforce partnership, perceived that consensus existed around the planned approach.

As we will describe later, a partnership’s structure seemed to facilitate or inhibit its ability to navigate these differing opinions.

Collaboration Structure

Structure at Start-Up

As was mentioned in the introduction, there was a high degree of diversity among workforce partnerships, particularly in their form and function. While we consistently use the term “partnership” throughout this memo in relation to all five funded entities, the term is used as the preferred SkillWorks name for each funded entity rather than as a description of the depth of the collaboration or the quality of the “partnership.” In reality, the five initial SkillWorks partnerships were quite different, ranging from a series of one-on-one relationships between the lead organization and individual employers (BSCPP) to large collaborations led by multiple organizations, engaging training providers and employers (PACE/HCRTI).

Before discussing in detail why the workforce partnerships selected different operating structures, it is important to first review their basic operational and organizational structures. Basic structural elements can be used to compare the partnerships—including who was selected to lead the partnership, how training and supportive services were staffed, and the number and type of employer partners recruited.

Lead organizations: Each partnership designated a lead organization to guide implementation and to serve as the fiscal agent. Three partnerships—BSCPP, HCC, and PCWD—were led by one organization; two partnerships—PACE and HCRTI—were led by multiple organizations, sharing the leadership responsibility.

The roles played by the lead organizations were generally consistent across the partnerships and ranged from orchestrating and managing partner relationships to making final decisions on programming. Other responsibilities included data tracking, hiring and employing staff, and developing and managing the partnership’s financial strategy.

Service provider partners: Organizations that deliver training and career coaching services were the most frequent “service provider” partners. Training providers, such as Jewish Vocational Services (JVS—which worked for both BSCPP and PCWD) and Madison Park Vocational Technical High School (PACE), helped to develop and deliver training curricula. Coaching organizations, such as WorkSource Partners (PCWD and HCRTI), provided one-on-one career coaching to incumbent participants. In addition to these two types of organizations, industry stakeholders like the Massachusetts Lodging Association (HCC) provided industry context and curriculum development assistance to some partnerships.

In general, service provider partners functioned more like traditional vendors. Since they were paid for their services this may have limited their flexibility to engage as partners in the same capacity as other stakeholders who do not have a contractual interest. The primary exception to this was PCWD’s pre-employment program. While JVS and Project Hope were both paid for their services, they did consider themselves project partners; PCWD staff felt similarly. The PCWD pre-employment program was structured in such a way that it capitalized perfectly on the strengths of

each organization—Project Hope in recruiting and engaging community members, JVS in delivering coursework and keeping students active in class, and PCWD with the internship and employment opportunities—which engendered mutual respect and trust among partners.

Employer partners: The number of employers in a partnership ranged from eight (HCRTI) to two (HCC). Most of the employers surveyed considered themselves partners in the SkillWorks-funded partnership, though the actual role played by employers varied from advisor to partner to customer. All partnerships tried to engage employers in decisionmaking about services that would be offered, but employers chose to participate in varying degrees. Some employers readily participated in curriculum conversations and participant recruitment sessions, wanting to have a high level of involvement and say in the structure of the training program. Other employers accessed the services that made sense for them, not concerning themselves with whether or not the program/partnership was offering services that exactly fit their needs. Finally, in the case of BSCPP where “the partnership” was actually a series of partnerships between the lead organization and individual employers, employers worked directly with the lead organization to design specific services to address their training and/or coaching needs.

Causes of Structural Diversity

There were two primary causes that seemed to drive diversity in initial partnership structure—existing relationships among CBOs and the presence of unions in the sector.

In two instances, the structure of the partnership was defined by existing relationships among CBOs. For both HCRTI and PACE, the lead organizations had worked together on previous sector partnerships. HCRTI actually continued and expanded an existing pilot incumbent program jointly led by Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation (JPNDC) and the Fenway Community Development Corporation (FCDC). Many of the employer partners were also involved in the pilot project. This experience led to the joint leadership structure and the initial methods of partner interaction. The PACE lead organizations had not previously implemented a program jointly but they were all grantees under the Commonwealth Corporation’s Building Essential Skills through Training (BEST) program. AACA took the lead in organizing the partnership and therefore served as the fiscal agent, but sought to share leadership with the two other CBOs in order to establish equal buy-in and to acknowledge their similar level of experience. Where such prior relationships did not exist, as was the case for PCWD, HCC and BSCPP, the partnerships tended to be led by single entities and designed around that organization and its strategic partners.

A second factor that had a profound influence on the way that partnerships were structured was the presence of unions within the target sector. The building services sector was the primary sector where this influence was observed (the healthcare and hospitality sectors also have unions but the SkillWorks partnerships decided to partner with non-union employers). For BSCPP, the overarching goal was the collective advancement of all its low-skilled union members through the establishment of a permanent training fund, rather than the individual gains of program participants. The partnership’s structure, the services it offered, and the projects it championed were all affected by this unique approach to advancement. Rather than seeking to create a comprehensive structure to aggregate and address the needs of multiple employers, the partnership focused on cultivating relationships with individual employers in order to understand their needs and ensure a minimum level of service for as many members as possible. This approach allowed BSCPP to cultivate employer relationships in order to ultimately succeed in establishing the training fund.

Partnerships' Structural Evolution

Over time, the structure of each SkillWorks partnership evolved to reflect changing industry demand and to take into account lessons learned about partnership management and service provider abilities. Table 2 illustrates how the partnership structure changed from partnership outset to the last year of implementation.

Table 2: Evolution of SkillWorks partnerships.

Partnership Name	Initial Partnership Structure				Final Partnership Structure			
	# of Lead Orgs.	# of Employer Partners	# of Training/Coaching Partners	Total # of Partners	# of Lead Orgs.	# of Employer Partners	# of Training/Coaching Partners	Total # of Partners
Building Services Career Pathway Project (BSCPP)	1	7	3	11	1	16	1	18
Health Care and Research Training Institute (HCRTI)	2	8	4	14	1	4	0	5
Hotel Career Center (HCC)	1	1 Hotel Chain: 2 Hotel Properties	1	4	1	1 Hotel Chain: 2 Hotel Properties*	1	4
Partnership for Community and Workforce Development (PCWD)	1	1 Healthcare System: 3 Hospitals, 1 Health Center	7	12	1	1 Healthcare System: 3 Hospitals	2**	6
Partnership for Automotive Career Education (PACE)	3	3	2	8	1	7	2	10

* In Years 2-4, the number of partner hotel properties increased to five and then slowly decreased back to two.

** Both training/coaching partners were involved in the pre-employment portion of the program.

The most obvious change visible in Table 2 is the fact that all partnerships ended with a single lead organization. While the circumstances were different—for PACE, two of the three PACE co-leads stopped participating in the partnership, and for HCRTI, the structure was completely changed with JVS replacing JPND and Fenway CDC as leads—the transition to a single lead organization was precipitated by the fact that both partnerships realized that it was very difficult to jointly manage and/or lead this type of partnership. Developing a workable staffing structure, ensuring accountability, and providing adequate leadership was challenging in an environment where all responsibility was shared—these challenges were often described by individuals interviewed for this report. HCRTI's experience provides evidence of these challenges. Specifically, even before JVS took over HCRTI and revamped the partnership structure, HCRTI grappled with how to improve the shared leadership environment. One solution it implemented was to move all project staff to one organization and create a position of operations manager. The changes improved operations but did not entirely resolve the problems.

There was also considerable variability over time in the number of employers in each partnership. In general, these changes were the result of a solidification of the training approach, and heavy recruiting. BSCPP is an example where the number of employer partners increased to reflect a new program being offered; when BSCPP began delivering the HVAC course, a large number of additional employers were interested in participating. On the opposite end of the spectrum is HCRTI. The number of employer partners gradually decreased over time due to HCRTI's narrowing of the services offered, as well as the cost of participation and limited data sharing (and therefore limited

accountability). PACE intentionally expanded its employer partner base in order to create additional placement opportunities for its pre-employment program graduates.

Consistently, the number of training and coaching partners stayed the same or decreased as partnerships implemented their programs. This is to be expected since the initial list of partners is often a wish-list, of sorts, that includes all services a partnership might provide. Over time, as the partnerships hone in on the actual services they will deliver, a smaller set of providers is needed to deliver the services. In addition to this natural attrition, the partnerships also terminated relationships with a few providers whose services were unsatisfactory or did not meet the partnerships' needs.

Collaboration Functioning

Partnership Activities

There are common activities that are expected of high performing workforce partnerships. Some of these activities include collaborating as a group on program design, discussing outcomes and potential program improvements, and investing financial or in-kind resources to support partnership activities. Partnership stakeholders were asked about their involvement in these types of activities. Table 3 is a summary of the responses we received during the stakeholder interviews.

Table 3: Responsibilities of participating partners.

	# of Partnerships that Involved Employers in:	# of Partnerships that Involved Services Providers in:
Developing partnership structure*	1	0
Overall program design	5	1
Providing regular feedback on outcomes, suggesting program improvements	3	1
Developing partnership sustainability strategy	3	0
Committing/ providing significant monetary or in kind resources	4	2

* Partnership structure includes identifying specific partners, defining partner roles, etc.

It is noteworthy that in each instance the lead organizations were the primary drivers of the partnership's structure. The structure was usually predetermined before organizations were asked to join the partnership in a specific role. This was not true in terms of program design; many stakeholders, particularly employers, were included in the process of defining the services to be offered and the program's target populations. Service provider partners were less involved in program design and functioned more as vendors, delivering services identified as necessary by the lead organizations and employer partners.

Three of the partnerships regularly involved employers in discussions about participant and programmatic outcomes, a standard partnership best practice. The other two partnerships were less likely to use data to inform their decisionmaking, meaning that employers were also less likely to receive updates and be involved in performance-based decisionmaking. Again, service providers contributed to the partnerships largely as traditional vendors. As such, they were not as involved as other partners and were often excluded from the regular feedback loop and monitoring and program evaluation.

In terms of program support and sustainability planning, employers were active participants in many of the partnerships. In four of the five partnerships, employers felt that they provided significant resources for ongoing program implementation; much of this contribution was in the form of paid release time, however there were also cash contributions from HCRTI employers (who provided substantial financial contributions for program management), PCWD (which provided paid staff time to run the programs), and HCC (hotel properties contributed a small amount of resources annually (\$5000) for program management).

Management Resources

The formality of the SkillWorks partnerships' management structure was assessed by examining the tools they used to help manage their partnership activities—tools such as memoranda of understanding (MOUs), strategic plans, and sustainability plans. Formalizing partnerships is important because it increases transparency between partners and ensures that reasonable expectations are held for the partnership, which, in turn, helps sustain partner commitment.

From the outset, one of the five partnerships, BSCPP, functioned differently from the other partnerships. Rather than functioning as a singular partnership that included many employer stakeholders and a set of service providers, the “partnership” was actually a series of individual relationships between the lead (a union) and different employers. This structure did not lend itself to formal management tools such as MOUs, strategic plans, etc. Instead, the individual relationships were cultivated through personal interaction and more formal documentation like contractual requirements between employers and union representation.

The other four partnerships used management tools to varying degrees to create structure for their interactions. When asked, all four lead organizations indicated that they had in place MOUs with all partners, written strategic plans, and written sustainability plans. Responses from the individual partners were less clear:

MOUs: Seventy-eight percent of service provider partners said that their partnership had and used MOUs in their interactions. On the other hand, only 36 percent of employers said they had an MOU with the lead organization and 27 percent indicated that the MOU was used.

Action Plan: Only 55 percent of non-lead partners (employers and service providers) said that their partnership had an action plan and even fewer said that it was used.

Sustainability Plan: About 30 percent of non-lead partners believed their partnership had or used a sustainability plan.

It is to be expected that lead partners would have a clearer sense of management tools developed and used to guide partnership activities. However, the substantial difference in responses between the lead partners and the rest of the partnership stakeholders may indicate that the tools were not used in a consistent or collaborative way that improved the effectiveness of the partnership.

Structural Factors that Seemed to Increase Partnership Effectiveness

When all structural elements are considered collectively, there are four factors that seem to promote effective collaboration and create a foundation for success.⁷ It is important to note, however, that the

evaluation team was unable to isolate a single model that appeared to predict a partnership’s success in achieving its objectives.

Unambiguous Leadership

Where there was clear and concise leadership, workforce partnerships were able to focus on their principal goals of meeting employer needs and training low-skilled workers. HCC, BSCPP, and PCWD were all led by strong organizations, though the types of organizations were distinct—a CBO, a non-profit arm of a union, and an employer. The other two partnerships, HCRTI and PACE, chose to share leadership between multiple community-based organizations: HCRTI was co-led and staffed by two community development corporations and PACE was co-led and staffed by three ethnically focused community-based organizations. In both instances, the structure was a challenge to manage and caused a diversion of resources away from the partnerships’ core missions.

PACE and HCRTI learned quickly that sharing leadership was difficult. The joint leadership required the project directors of both partnerships to spend considerable time coordinating—coordinating leadership, the delivery of services, and the general administration of the program. As one partnership representative described it, “It’s hard to sustain the partnership and to control for quality. The project director had to spend a lot of time managing the partnership instead of doing the work.” In partnerships with singular leadership, this time was spent instead on activities like adapting curricula to meet employer needs and more in-depth case management.

Project staffing was particularly challenging for the partnerships led by more than one organization. At PACE and HCRTI, each of the co-leads employed a portion of the project staff, who performed pre-employment participant recruitment, case management, and some career coaching. The partnerships created these staffing structures to increase their applicant pools, assuming that recruitment by different organizations would increase the diversity and number of applicants, ultimately improving the quality of program graduates. The partnerships were successful in their recruitment but a critical side effect of the structure was that very few staff worked on the project full time. As a result, staff were supervised indirectly by the partnership director for their SkillWorks work and supervised by another individual for their CBO or CDC related work, which created confusion for the employees and a lack of accountability for the partnerships. Staff spent a substantial amount of time inefficiently monitoring performance and trying to identify poor performers. Performance was not transparent and it was difficult to determine who was spending adequate time on SkillWorks related tasks because of individuals’ complex job descriptions.

Operationally, the toughest part of implementation was staffing. With multiple organizations employing partnership staff, it was hard to know who was supervising who.

Representative from a lead organization.

Ultimately, the benefits gained by the complex structure were undermined by the management inefficiencies the structure created. Eventually, both PACE and HCRTI reorganized in order to establish one entity as the lead organization.

Critical Importance of Trust

Many individuals interviewed highlighted trust as a key characteristic of successful workforce partnerships. In some partnerships, such as HCC, trust was present at the start. IIB and the Hilton Corporation entered the SkillWorks partnership with mutual trust because of an existing relationship through IIB's pre-employment program—the Hospitality Training Program (HTP). Because of this awareness, IIB was perceived as qualified and was trusted implicitly to design a program that would benefit the employers and the workers.

For other partnerships, trust had to be built, particularly between employers and the lead organizations and/or service providers. Regardless of whether trust had to be built or maintained, trust was fostered by staff consistency, follow-through on commitments, and establishing a track record of being qualified to perform the role assigned. With trust, partnerships were able to weather unexpected challenges and lower than hoped-for outcomes, and felt empowered to experiment with services to be offered.

If you have trust [as we did], you can move beyond fear and introduce creativity. You can take risks on individuals or programs and not worry that you're going to be punished if the risk doesn't pan out as expected.

Representative of lead organization

BSCPP was a strong example of trust that was built by staff consistency. Throughout the four years of implementation, BSCPP had one leader. This leader was respected by the employer partners, which allowed for trust to be built and ultimately programs to be implemented. In terms of follow-through, JVS quickly earned the trust of employers when it took over the restructured HCRTI—re-titled the Healthcare Training Institute (HTI). JVS paid attention to employers' needs, narrowed the range of services to be delivered, and then delivered exactly what it had promised. This series of actions led employers to trust the JVS staff and agree to an ongoing commitment with the Healthcare Training Institute in Phase 2 of the SkillWorks Initiative.

Without the characteristics mentioned above—staff consistency, follow-through on commitments, and instilling confidence in the lead's capacity—trust was often compromised. As one employer said, “the lead organizations were small organizations without a lot of staff depth. As the programs being offered became larger and more complex, they were unable to meet employer expectations.” In this particular case, the employers lost confidence in the credibility of the service providers and trust was compromised.

Balanced Size Considerations

The number of stakeholders in a workforce partnership, particularly employers, should be guided by partnership needs. For example, the SkillWorks partnerships clearly demonstrated that pre-employment and incumbent program elements benefit from different employer partner structures. Pre-employment programs are strengthened by a sizable employer partner base. This strong support base helps to facilitate placements and increases the partnership's influence on its target sector. PACE initially started with a small number of employer partners and steadily increased this number over the four years of implementation in order to improve its placement rates and increase its ability to place individuals with different skills in a variety of automotive settings.

Incumbent programs seem to function differently. The smaller the number of employer partners, the easier it is to customize services to meet employer needs. PCWD is a good example of this principle. By focusing on the training needs of three hospital properties, PCWD was able to successfully coordinate the services it delivered and to ensure that they were flexible and adaptable to employers' needs. HCRTI had a much more difficult time meeting the needs of its nine employer partners.⁸

The similarity of employer partners' training needs is another consideration when determining a partnership's ideal number of employer partners. When HTI began to focus on the ESOL needs of its employer partners, consistency in employer needs allowed for it to successfully meet the needs of multiple employers simultaneously. Prior to this narrowing of focus, HCRTI was challenged to meet employers' expectations, which included pre-college courses, ESOL courses, skill-based trainings, and more.

It was challenging to develop a training curriculum that took into account the diverse needs of multiple types of employers. By trying to fit workers from different types of employers into a single training, the training was unable to meet specific employer needs.

Representative of non-lead organization

The PACE partnership also faced a wide range of employer demands and consistently struggled to meet expectations. Essentially, PACE tried to use one set of trainings (Module 1 and Module 2) to meet the needs of two very different types of employer partners—automotive dealerships and tire repair shops. Automotive dealerships had extensive career ladders and specific dealer-related trainings that they wanted their advancing entry-level workers to complete. They were looking for PACE to deliver entry-level workers that they could groom. These candidates didn't need the in-depth level of training offered by PACE. The tire repair shops, on the other hand, had more opportunities for low-level automotive technicians and benefitted from PACE's development of ASE training programs for their incumbent workers. These employers wanted PACE graduates to have a minimum level of automotive technical skills, as was provided in PACE's in-depth modules. In fact, the employers often pressed for additional skills and preferred to hire graduates after they had completed Modules 1 and 2, instead of just Module 1 as was originally expected. PACE was consistently challenged by this diversity of needs and often fell short of meeting both sets of expectations.

Employer Partners That Can Promote Their Immediate Needs, While Also Seeing Beyond Them

Evidence suggests that a workforce partnership's success may be bolstered by recruiting employer partners that are able to see beyond their immediate needs and the goals of the narrow partnership to consider greater industry needs.⁹ This does not mean that employers should ever be expected to view broader industry needs as more important than the training needs of their own employees. But when employers recognize that their own immediate hiring and retention needs are part of a broader industry-wide challenge they will be more willing to work collaboratively with other employers to create sectoral training strategies.

Employer partners in two SkillWorks partnerships showed this type of expansive thinking—PACE and HCC. PACE employer partners continued to work with the PACE partnership even though the number of placements made at each partner was relatively small (on average between 5 and 10 over

four years). These partners saw the PACE program as an important investment in the future of the industry, drawing in a population of workers that might not be able to access the automotive industry without the support of a program like PACE. HCC employer partners supported industry-wide goals in a slightly different way.¹⁰ They saw the advancement of their employees out of the hospitality industry or even into higher-skilled placements at other hotel properties as a positive outcome of the program. Helping workers gain skills in order to advance was a benefit to the properties while the employees were there. When the employees left, they created openings for other HTP placements (IIB's highly respected hospitality pre-employment program) and they took the skills they had gained with them to enhance the industry or the overall Boston economy. The employer partners' attitudes were largely pragmatic—turnover at the hotel properties was low, which meant that employees with new skills had limited advancement opportunities. These employers understood that a certain amount of attrition was to be expected and could be managed and turned into opportunities for remaining employees.

Influence of External Factors

While each of these structural elements had a profound influence on a workforce partnership's ability to accomplish its goals, the influence of external factors that were beyond a partnership's control seemed to have an equal ability to promote or hinder the partnership's success. In fact, the SkillWorks partnerships' actual structures did not seem to have as much influence on desired outcomes as other external factors such as the economy, industry characteristics, and participant barriers. For example, HCRTI and PACE were both faced with a slowing in the economy that decreased employers' needs for entry-level workers; HCC had anticipated working with workers with higher starting skill levels so they did not anticipate the slower rates of advancements; and HCRTI and PCWD ended up having to simplify course offerings, partly because of participant needs but also because they could not deliver advanced skill training without community college partners, which were difficult to engage.

That having been said, there are initial indications that structural elements discussed above can help partnerships adapt to or accommodate the impact of these external factors. The shared leadership structure at HCRTI and PACE made it difficult for each of these programs to adjust to the shifting economic demands. Hard decisions were delayed or only partially made—rather than firmly deciding whether to revamp the programs to address employer demand or significantly alter the employer recruitment process to create more placement opportunities, minor changes were made around the edges of the programs. This resulted in lower than expected placement rates in both of the programs and the ultimate cessation of the HCRTI pre-employment classes.

In a partnership that is jointly managed, it is difficult to find success when it comes to decision making. This is because it is hard to know who has decision making authority.

Representative from a lead organization.

PCWD provides another example of the interconnection between external factors and structure. Because the partnership was led by an employer, it was able to adjust its own thinking about worker advancement objectives. PCWD managed the political environment internally to lower expectations while simultaneously looking for ways to create new training opportunities that would meet the managers' and supervisors' needs while taking into account the starting skill levels of incumbent workers.

Additional research is needed to truly understand how partnership structure and function can allow partnerships to adapt to their changing environment. Observing multiple partnerships in similar industries with common training objectives would allow for the most robust type of evaluation.

Conclusion

Phase I demonstrated a variety of workforce partnership structures that were often reflective of pre-existing collaborations. They were further characterized by a diversity of partnership goals, sector characteristics, and capacity and interests of lead organizations and non-lead organizations (including employers). Despite this diversity of organizational composition, structure, and management approach, several common traits were identified that broadly enhanced their effectiveness, including:

- Unambiguous leadership
- Trust
- Appropriate partnership size
- Broad-minded employers with an industry-wide perspective

While external factors were also seen to influence partnership operational and programmatic effectiveness, the traits listed above can set partnerships on the road to success. It is essential that partnerships remain attentive to their design, structure, and function since it can be instrumental in advancing the overall mission of the initiative.

The Phase 1 implementation experience suggests that funders should not hold partnerships to a particular model. Rather, they should ensure that each workforce partnership is clear about how the model it has chosen will achieve the funders' intended outcomes that emphasize:

- Promoting collaboration and understanding among stakeholders
- Sharing program investments and taking joint responsibility for the outcomes
- Balancing both demand and supply side considerations in workforce development
- Developing or solidifying a continuum of services that allows workers to advance in skills and resulting economic benefits
- Creating systemic changes among employers and service providers that will allow for positive outcomes beyond the time frame of SkillWorks funding

Funders can effectively communicate their commitment to this flexible approach in a number of ways. They can start by clearly articulating and illustrating characteristics and practices of successful partnerships that can serve as broad benchmarks for new or emerging collaboratives (similar to the bulleted list above, with concrete examples from past partnerships). Furthermore, they can encourage workforce partnerships to have each partner define exactly why they are involved and what they expect will be the benefits they receive. This information can be used to identify and discuss unrealistic expectation, as well as to periodically assess how well the partnership is meeting each participants needs. If needs are not being met, partners will begin to disengage and the overall effectiveness of the partnership will suffer. Conducting some form of periodic self-assessment will help the partnerships monitor, diagnose and address any unfulfilled expectations.

Finally, funders can proactively demonstrate their commitment to flexibility by dedicating resources to providing capacity building assistance. With this support, the partnerships will, ideally, perform

more effectively, increasing staffing consistency, product quality, and overall partnership communication, all factors seen in Phase 1 to build trust among partners.

Ultimately, this analysis suggests that variation in partnership structure is inevitable and desirable. It is important that SkillWorks funders embrace this diversity and work to ensure that all have the support needed to maximize their capacity to meet the common objectives of SkillWorks.

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- ¹ See R. Ferguston & S.E. Stoutland, *Reconceiving the community development field*, in Urban Problems and Community Development (R. Ferguson & W.Dickens (Eds.)), 33-76, Brookings Institution Pres, 1999; X. Briggs, *Perfect fit or shotgun marriage?: Understanding the power and pitfalls in partnerships*. Strategy Tool #1, The Community Problem Solving Project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003; *Powering the future: High-performance partnerships*. National Academy of Public Administration, 2003; R. Gadja, *Utilizing collaboration theory to evaluate strategic alliances*. American Journal of Evaluation, 25(1), 65-77, 2004; F. Ostrower, *The Reality underneath the buzz of partnerships*. Stanford Social Innovation Review, 3(1), 34-21, 2005.
 - ² *2003 Request for Proposals: Workforce Partnerships Component*. Boston Workforce Development Initiative.
 - ³ A sampling of other initiatives includes the Bay Area Workforce Funding Collaborative, Baltimore Alliance for Careers in Healthcare, and the Pennsylvania Workforce Intermediaries Project.
 - ⁴ The evolving structure of each partnership is discuss later in this memo. For additional information about each partnership, see separate Partnership Profiles published in 2009.
 - ⁵ *Key Features of SkillWorks and its Theory of Change*. Boston Workforce Development Initiative. October 6, 2004.
 - ⁶ While workforce partnerships were to have experience with sector-based strategies, SkillWorks funding was designed as a new funding stream in order to seed fund new activities by existing collaborations.
 - ⁷ While not structural in nature, partnerships' knowledge of industry trends, including awareness of hiring cycles, employer culture, and the complexity of training needs, proved to be an invaluable skill. Without this awareness, workforce partnerships were limited in their ability to successfully design and implement effective training programs.
 - ⁸ This diversity of partner needs is complicated by the SkillWorks objective to have pre-employment participants merge into incumbent programs. It may be that certain employer partners play a larger role in the overall partnership, engaging in both the pre-employment and incumbent elements, while other employers may only focus on one or the other. This was the approach being pursued by PACE and HCC in the final years of implementation.
 - ⁹ Lead partners and their funders often desire to build this mindset into employers as a partnership is implemented. SkillWorks Phase 1 experience provides little evidence that it is possible to foster such a dramatic shift in employer mindset if it does not already exist.
 - ¹⁰ One BSCPP employer expressed a similar attitude, believing that worker advancement would be positive, even if it was to its detriment as an employer.

SEEING OPPORTUNITIES. CREATING SOLUTIONS.

SkillWorks, a public-private partnership, is addressing the needs of employers for more skilled workers and of workers for more and better access to jobs that pay a family-supporting wage.

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