

Mid-Year Assessment of the Capacity Building Component of the SkillWorks Initiative

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(*Edited and expanded version*)**

Introduction

This report presents the mid-year assessment of the Capacity Building Component of the SkillWorks initiative. The report primarily focuses on the period of January through July 2006, although it also covers some activities both before and after that period. This mid-year assessment was based on the evaluation team's review of written materials, observations of meetings and participation in conference calls of the Capacity Building Committee of the SkillWorks Funders Group, and interviews with key stakeholders in SkillWorks capacity-building activities. Interviews were conducted with the chair and members of the Capacity Building Committee, the SkillWorks Director, and the Capacity Building Consultant, as well as with representatives of each of the SkillWorks Implementation Partnerships.

This report begins with a brief review of the evolution of the Capacity Building Component of SkillWorks. It then details the various types of capacity building activities that were conducted during the period of January through July of 2006, highlighting who conducted the capacity-building activities, who benefited, and some initial results of these activities. This is followed with a "cross-walk" examining the alignment of the capacity-building activities with the on-going challenges for the Implementation Partnerships that had been identified in the Year 2 SkillWorks Evaluation Report. Then, we present information on the feedback received from the Implementation Partnerships relative to the value of the capacity-building activities, and the ways in which they feel that future capacity-building assistance could be enhanced.¹ We also highlight the perspectives of the SkillWorks Director, Capacity Building Consultant, and members of the Capacity Building Committee relative to the process of implementing the Year 3 capacity building activities, and the apparent efficacy of those activities. The report concludes with some additional observations on the focus on capacity-building efforts as SkillWorks enters its fourth year of operations.

¹ The interview protocols used for obtaining the input of Implementation Partnerships and members of the Capacity Building Committee of the SkillWorks Funders Group are attached at the end of this report.

Background on the Evolution of the Capacity Building Component

The SkillWorks initiative is a five-year, public-private investment of approximately \$15 million on the part of philanthropies, government, community organizations, and employers to change how workforce development is done in Boston and the state of Massachusetts. SkillWorks seeks to address the needs of employers for more skilled workers, and of workers (primarily low-income, low-skilled Boston residents) for more and better access to jobs that pay family-supporting wages.

SkillWorks expects to accomplish large scale, sustainable improvement in the workforce development system by focusing on three strategies:

- Capacity building for workforce partnerships and service providers;
- Support of workforce partnerships that demonstrate improved practices; and
- Public policy advocacy.

Taken together, these three SkillWorks initiative components have often been described by the metaphor of a “three-legged stool”. As such, the capacity of each of the strategic components to complement and reinforce the others is seen as critical to the ability of SkillWorks to achieve success relative to its system change goals.

However, to date the Capacity Building Component has experienced two distinct phases, and during the first phase was not closely integrated with the rest of the SkillWorks activities. The initial capacity-building activities (Phase I of the Capacity Building Component) were conducted under the aegis of the Rockefeller Foundation’s “Initiative to Strengthen Organizational Effectiveness in Workforce Development.” Under this first phase, which lasted approximately four years (2001-2005)², the Rockefeller Foundation supported five non-profit, workforce development service providers in Boston to improve their operational competencies and performance.³ Specific attention was paid to increasing the number of “poor and excluded” job seekers served by the organizations, and improving their client outcomes relative to job placement, retention, and wage advancement.

Over the life of the Rockefeller Initiative, all five participating nonprofits in Boston were able to demonstrate concrete improvements in capacity and performance.⁴ Moreover, four of five Boston organizations participating in the Rockefeller Initiative became

² Although there was an attempt to coordinate the efforts, the Rockefeller Initiative’s capacity-building “component” in Boston commenced approximately one and a half years before the launching of the SkillWorks Implementation Partnership and Public Policy Advocacy components, which began in the fall of 2003.

³ In addition to its activities in Boston, the Rockefeller Initiative also supported non-profit workforce development providers in Fort Worth, Texas and Nashville, Tennessee. In each city, the Rockefeller Foundation’s funding was matched by local philanthropic and/or government sources.

⁴ For more information, see *Rockefeller Foundation Initiative to Strengthen Organizational Effectiveness in Workforce Development: Final Evaluation Report*, July 2006 (Abt Associates, Inc.).

partners in SkillWorks Implementation Partnerships. Although Phase I of the Capacity Building Component had helped these organizations to compete successfully for Implementation Partnership funding, at the conclusion of the Rockefeller Initiative the SkillWorks Funders Group felt it would be beneficial to integrate this component more fully into the overall SkillWorks effort to support the other strategic elements. Accordingly, under Phase II of the Capacity Building Component, the Funders Group chose to concentrate on capacity-building activities that would improve the ability of the existing Implementation Partnerships to achieve the goals spelled out in their applications and workplans.

Phase II Capacity Building Activities

Consistent with the priorities set by the SkillWorks Funders Group, during the period of January through July 2006 the Capacity Building Component focused on four distinct sets of activities:

- Assessment of the capacity building needs of the Implementation Partnerships, both individually and as a group;
- Provision of group training and peer-learning opportunities;
- Individualized, one-on-one technical assistance to Implementation Partnerships; and
- Mini-grants for Implementation Partnerships to secure additional resources to pursue key capacity-building efforts.

These efforts involved a substantial level of effort on the part of the SkillWorks Director, Loh-Sze Leung, as well as a significant time commitment on the part of the members of the Capacity Building Committee. In addition, a major factor in the ability of the SkillWorks initiative to implement this set of activities was the hiring of a Capacity Building Consultant. Jenny Freeman of Freeman Consulting Services, Inc. was selected for this position in February 2006. Ms. Freeman worked closely with the Ms. Leung, and in consultation with the Capacity Building Committee, focused on completing the capacity-building assessments, on designing and organizing the group trainings, and on coordinating the implementation of the mini-grant effort. As will be discussed below, Ms. Freeman also played a central role in the delivery of one-on-one technical assistance to the Implementation Partnerships.

Below we profile each of the sets of capacity-building activities conducted during Year 3, particularly focusing on the first half of the program year.

Assessments of Capacity Building Needs

In January 2006, a preliminary assessment of the capacity-building needs of the Implementation Partnerships was shared with the Capacity Building Committee. This assessment was based on information that Loh-Sze Leung and Jenny Freeman⁵ had

⁵ Ms. Freeman's efforts on this task were financed, in part, through a small contract with SkillWorks for general initiative support.

gathered, looking at both the needs that the partnerships themselves had articulated, and those that the SkillWorks evaluation team, the Boston PIC and Jobs for the Future⁶ had identified. This preliminary assessment was updated through additional conversations held with the Implementation Partnerships in February. According to this analysis, the key capacity-building priorities across the Implementation Partnerships were:

- Technical assistance on career coaching models to help partnerships develop capacity to move workers to FESS;
- Identification of mechanisms for sustainability of the Partnership efforts;
- Guidance on workplace-based education, particularly contextualized ESOL;
- Enhancements MIS/IT capacity (data collection, analysis, and reporting); and
- Methods to improve relations and communications with employers (i.e., employer engagement).

Individual partnerships had also articulated technical assistance needs relative to referral system development (Building Services/VFF), partnership governance (PACE), new training track development (HCC), and “release time” research and implementation guidance (PCWD).

Based on this research, a capacity-building plan for each Implementation Partnership was developed, reflecting both the needs that would be addressed through one-on-one technical assistance and those that would be addressed through group training. These plans were shared with the Capacity Building Committee for its review in March 2006.

Group Training and Technical Assistance

Exhibit 1 highlights the key group training & technical assistance and peer learning opportunities that have been offered to the Implementation Partnerships during 2006. As the table demonstrates, most of the group sessions concentrated on topics closely related to the capacity-building priorities identified during the needs assessment process that had been conducted from December 2005 through February 2006 (see above). In addition, several sessions were held to help the SkillWorks grantees develop a common understanding of the overall goals of the initiative, and/or to improve cross-learning among strategic components. This was particularly important relative to developing a common definition of “systems change” across the grantees, and getting the Implementation Partnerships to more fully recognize their roles (and develop mechanisms to document their successes) in generating such change.

⁶ During the period 2003 through 2005, the Boston PIC had provided management oversight of the Implementation Partnerships, and Jobs for the Future had provided consulting services to the overall initiative and to its individual partnerships.

Exhibit 1: Group Training and Technical Assistance		
Activity	Key Trainer, Facilitator, or TA Provider	Date
Session on SkillWorks Systems Change Goals	Workforce Solutions Group, Loh-Sze Leung, Jenny Freeman	April 2006
Business Value Assessment Training (documenting results and building the case for employer investment)	The Aspen Institute Workforce Strategies Initiative	April 2006
Dissemination of research on private and public funding sources	Geoff Beane, Jenny Freeman	April 2006
SkillWorks Retreat on Goal Clarification	Alan Brickman	May 2006
Career Coaching Training Series for Coaches	Amy Mazur Stephanie Legatos	February – July 2006
Career Coaching Session for Managers	Jenny Freeman Yariela Kerr-Donovan Karen Shack	July 2006
Meeting on priorities of Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund	Workforce Solutions Group, Loh-Sze Leung, Jenny Freeman	August 2006

Individualized Technical Assistance

The following table (Exhibit 2) summarizes the individualized technical assistance and counseling received by the Implementation Partnerships through June 2006, and some of the results that the technical assistance has fostered.

Exhibit 2: Individualized TA		
Implementation Partnership	Individualized Technical Assistance (TA) Provided to Partnership	Results of the Technical Assistance and/or Next Steps
HCC/IIB	Assistance to begin development of sustainability strategy	Development of plan to expand employer connections, as well as public and foundation sources
	Research on hospitality sectoral initiatives and related HR practices/policies	Research led to further exploration with local hotel workers union; application for Workforce Training Fund with Massachusetts Lodging Assn and Bunker Hill Community College

Exhibit 2: Individualized TA		
Implementation Partnership	Individualized Technical Assistance (TA) Provided to Partnership	Results of the Technical Assistance and/or Next Steps
	Identification of consultants for development of data system to measure business value and resource development	Projects included in HCC capacity-building mini-grant applications
HCRTI	TA to plan for transition to new program director	Capacity-building mini-grant application
	Joint strategy/planning relative to sustainability planning	Capacity-building mini-grant application
	Planning for continuation of upgrading of IT and data collection systems	Capacity-building mini-grant application
Building Services Project/VFF	Technical assistance in developing revised workplan and benchmarks for advancement program	Revised workplan, submitted to SkillWorks in June 2006
PACE	Research on auto industry sectoral initiatives, particularly focusing on financial mechanisms and structures of other automotive training programs	Development of mini-grant application to support strategic and business planning, to refine PACE model, market niche, and financing mechanisms
	Assistance in identification of appropriate strategic planning consultants	See above
	Technical assistance on governance issues relative to managing decision-making among multiple partners	Identification of appropriate roles for PACE subcommittees
PCWD	Research on release time policies of other hospital-based workforce development projects	A pilot program was started based on the release time research. The pilot program serves 10 food and nutrition employees at Brigham and Women's Hospital who attend weekly hour-long financial literacy sessions on full release for several weeks.

Exhibit 2: Individualized TA		
Implementation Partnership	Individualized Technical Assistance (TA) Provided to Partnership	Results of the Technical Assistance and/or Next Steps
	Research on alternative models of workplace education (“modularized, contextualized”), particularly for ESOL/ABE	Identification of resources for curricula and model development; information used to draft an RFP to identify appropriate education/training partner to establish the workplace education program at Partners
	Sustainability planning assistance, including research on potential public funding sources	Development of sustainability plan, and workplan for new Partners Workforce Development Director
Boston Community Health Worker Initiative/ABCD	Assessment of capacity-building needs, and identification of potential TA consultants	Selection of a consultant to provide TA support to the partnership on an on-going basis

Again, the focus of the one-on-one technical assistance was closely related to the capacity-building priority areas that had been identified through the needs assessment process. Another aspect of the individualized technical assistance worth noting is that a substantial portion of it was concerned with helping the partnerships access additional funding to address their capacity needs, rather than in providing technical guidance on the issues themselves.

Mini-grants

The mini-grant application form, application protocol, and schedule for submission of proposals were drafted in January 2006 and approved by the Capacity-Building Committee. Copies of the application form and information on the application process were then shared with the Implementation Partnerships. The following table (Exhibit 3) indicates the applications that were received from the Implementation Partnerships and the actions taken on them:

Exhibit 3: Focus of Mini-Grants			
Implementation Partnership	Proposed Purpose of Grant (and When Proposal Received/Reviewed)	Action Taken	SkillWorks Funded Amount
HCRTI	Database enhancements; increased database security; staff training on MIS	Approved	\$6,000

Exhibit 3: Focus of Mini-Grants			
Implementation Partnership	Proposed Purpose of Grant (and When Proposal Received/Reviewed)	Action Taken	SkillWorks Funded Amount
	(March 2006)		
Building Services/VFF	Improvements to communications, community outreach, and media relations capacity (March 2006)	Approved	\$6,000
HCC	Curriculum development/program design for “front desk” training (March 2006)	Approved (after clarifications)	\$13,168
PCWD	Transform PCWD website into value-added program resource to support employee career development (April 2006)	Approved (after receipt of additional information)	\$4,800
HCC	(Business value) outcome measurement assistance; assistance with grant development and program design (June 2006)	Approved	\$11,907
HCRTI	Transition planning, sustainability planning, and additional database enhancements (June/July 2006)	Approved (after revisions)	\$20,100
PACE	Support for market analysis/feasibility study and strategic planning activities (July 2006)	Approved (strategic planning portion after revisions)	\$20,250

The mini-grant process allowed the Implementation Partnerships considerable discretion relative the types of capacity-building activities that they could pursue. However, the Capacity-Building Committee approached the review of the mini-grant proposals very seriously, and as Exhibit 3 indicates, frequently approved the grants only after certain clarifications were offered or revisions made in the proposed scope of work.

Another feature of the mini-grants was that some of the Implementation Partnerships were much more active than others in taking advantage of this resource. Although all five of the Round 1 and Round 2 partnerships obtained assistance through a mini-grant, the level of mini-grant resources obtained by the Building Services project and PCWD were far more modest than the mini-grant funds secured by the other partnerships.

Comparison of Issues Identified in the Year 2 Evaluation Report with the Year 3 Capacity Building Activities

The following presents a brief “cross-walk” between the individual and cross-partnership challenges identified in the Year 2 Skillworks Evaluation Report, and the Phase II capacity-building activities conducted during Year 3.

IIB/HCC issues identified in the Year 2 evaluation report:

- The wage structure of the hospitality industry and its limited opportunities for promotion and for achieving FESS-level salaries, especially in non-unionized hotel properties;
- The fact that a substantial portion of placements from the pre-employment component were continuing to occur at non-Hilton properties; and
- The challenge of increasing employer (Hilton) underwriting of HCC.

The first of these issues has been addressed somewhat through the Phase II capacity-building research on other hospitality sectoral initiatives (which led to an exploration of a closer relationship with the local hotel workers union) and by the mini-grant supporting curriculum development for “front desk” positions. The third issue has begun to be addressed through assistance in developing a sustainability strategy, and the technical assistance relative to developing data systems to measure business value and resource development.⁷

The second issue has not yet been addressed by the Phase II capacity-building activities.

PCWD issues identified in the Year 2 evaluation report: The need for:

- More effective utilization of Champions and Ambassadors to further the overall goals of the PCWD initiative;
- Improvements in tracking of participant outcomes in areas of skill development;
- Development of a more flexible coaching model that addresses the different needs of employees;
- Increased retention of participating incumbent workers;
- Increased retention of pre-employment participants placed in Partners jobs;
- Addressing the time lag between completion of pre-employment training and job placement;
- Developing a sustainability strategy for PCWD within the Partners system; and
- Increased engagement of the employers within the Partners system to use their clout to get the higher education system to be more responsive to the employers’ needs.

The fourth and fifth of these issues have been somewhat addressed, albeit indirectly, by the research supporting improved release time policies, on alternative models of workplace education, and on career coaching models, as well as through the mini-grant to

⁷ Major staff turnover and resultant program strategy changes have impacted IIB/HCC’s ability to follow through on some of the initiative fostered by the capacity-building activities, particularly relative to the incumbent worker component.

upgrade the PCWD website into a resource to support employee career development. The seventh bulleted item was addressed in part by the sustainability planning assistance provided through individualized technical assistance, the group training on Return on Investment, and the research provided on private and public funding sources.⁸

HCRTI issues identified in the Year 2 evaluation report:

- Responding to the customized demands of individual employer partners;
- Turnover in top management and staff;
- Improving MIS and reporting; and
- Institutionalizing HCRTI's role in LMA employers' broader recruitment and professional development activities.

The two of these bulleted items addressed most directly, and effectively, by the Phase II capacity-building activities were the turnover in management staff and the need to improve MIS and reporting capacity. HCRTI received both individualized technical assistance and mini-grants to help with staff transition planning and implementing enhancements to the HCRTI database. HCRTI also received some assistance relative to the fourth item in the above list, through the provision of individualized technical assistance and some mini-grant funds relative to sustainability planning.

PACE issues identified in the Year 2 evaluation-related data collection and evaluation report:

- Defining the proper role of PACE relative to pre-employment and incumbent worker training in the automotive services sector, and developing a sustainability strategy relative to that role;
- Resolving concerns about what constitutes appropriate data collection from incumbent workers; and
- Clarifying in reporting the distinction between training services offered to supervisors and those offered to line workers.

The Phase II activities assisted PACE in addressing the first of these bulleted items, with individualized technical assistance providing research on other auto industry sectoral initiatives and on the structures of other automotive training programs, and a mini-grant to conduct a strategic planning process.⁹

Building Services Career Path Project issues identified in the Year 2 evaluation-related data collection and evaluation report:

⁸ It should be noted that the PCWD representatives found the training on career coaching to be too basic, and felt that the research on public funding sources needed to be more targeted to be useful.

⁹ Many of the other items on the capacity-building plan negotiated between PACE and the Capacity Building Consultant were put "on hold" until the strategic planning process was concluded; the departure of the PACE Project Director is also impacting the ability to follow-through on those items. It is also worth noting that the research conducted on other automotive technology programs focused primarily on pre-employment, whereas the PACE Project Director had been especially interested in incumbent programs. This disconnect appears to have occurred because the PACE Project Director allegedly did not have any direct communication with the subcontractor completing the research.

- Developing refinements to participant recruitment targeting and interventions that offer reasonable possibilities for career path advancement of participating workers within the industry and within the term of SkillWorks funding;
- As part of the foregoing, strengthening of individualized coaching and career management; and
- Finding strategies to increase collaboration across employers, to achieve more efficiencies and foster cross-employer institutional changes.

BSCPP received assistance relative to the first of these bulleted issues through individualized technical assistance relative to developing a revised workplan and benchmarks for participant advancement. The discussions of advancement strategies also incorporated planned changes to the career coaching model (the second bulleted item); BSCPP representatives also attended the group training on coaching.¹⁰

Common cross-partnership issues/challenges identified in the Year 2 evaluation report:

- Building and maintaining partnership capacity (and concerns over financial stability and sustainability);
- Achieving scale;
- Tenuous links between pre-employment and incumbent components; and
- Connections between partnerships' perceptions of their needs and the agenda of Workforce Solutions Group.

The Phase II capacity building activities largely addressed the first and fourth bulleted items on this list. The first item was addressed through a combination of group trainings on business value assessment, dissemination of research on funding sources, one-on-one technical assistance relative to marketing and sustainability planning, and mini-grants to conduct more in-depth strategic and sustainability planning. The fourth item was addressed through a group training session on SkillWorks' system change goals, the May 2006 retreat, and the August 2005 meeting on priorities of the Workforce Training Fund.

As can be seen from the above summary, although not all of the challenges identified in the Year 2 evaluation report were addressed, nonetheless there was a fairly good alignment between the Phase II capacity-building activities undertaken and the list of priority institutional and performance challenges spelled out in the Year 2 report.

Feedback from the Implementation Partnerships

As we noted at the beginning of this report, our research for this mid-year assessment of the Capacity Building Component also entailed interviews with representatives of each of the Implementation Partnerships. The following are some of the generalized themes and observations emerging from the interviews with the partnerships' representatives.

The Implementation Partnerships are grateful for the dedicated pool of flexible funds to assist them on a wide variety of activities.

¹⁰ BSCPP contracts with Jewish Vocation Services (JVS) for career coaching, and felt because of the expertise of JVS in this area, the group training on coaching was too basic and therefore less relevant.

All of the Implementation Partnerships found value in the capacity building activities and were very grateful to have some dedicated resources for that purpose. Examples of what the Implementation Partnerships found most valuable are listed below:

- Additional research that otherwise could not have been completed;
- Assistance with unexpected circumstances such as leadership transition;
- Opportunity for systematic reflection and planning on capacity building needs;
- A conduit for communicating with the Funders Group;
- Assistance in preparation of refunding applications;
- Opportunities for group/peer interaction; and
- Additional capacity not originally funded through the grant

Communications with the Implementation Partnerships regarding the Capacity Building Component (and on the role of the Capacity Building Consultant) could have been significantly improved.

- The Implementation Partnerships were initially unclear exactly what expertise the Capacity Building Consultant (Jenny Freeman) brought to the table, and were not certain about what concrete types of assistance she could provide. Although the more seasoned partnership directors were more quickly able to figure out how to tap what she brought to the table (particularly her ability to connect them to other experts and/or funding), for some of the partnerships it was a long education process.
- There was not clarity around who was ultimately Jenny Freeman’s client, the Funders Group or the Implementation Partnerships. To truly make use of capacity building assistance, the Implementation Partnerships felt they needed to be comfortable highlighting their weaknesses. Some Implementation Partnerships were less open about doing so in an environment in which they felt that such information might be passed from the Capacity Building Consultant to the Funders Group.
 - “When Jenny says ‘you need to work on this’ is that Jenny speaking or is that the Funders speaking through Jenny?”
 - “It was hard to see her as a non-biased [neutral] advocate for us”
 - “If you are coming to me because this is what the Funders want, than say it.”
- The Implementation Partnerships felt that respective roles of Loh-Sze Leung and Jenny Freeman needed to be explicitly clarified. Some partnerships were not entirely clear when to seek out assistance from Ms. Leung versus from Ms. Freeman.
 - “I try to meet with them both at the same time, so I don’t have to repeat myself.”
 - “They are both helpful but I am not sure which person I should deal with on which issue.”
 - “They were both new at the same time, which complicated matters. Role definition was a secondary problem.”

The terms “capacity building” and “technical assistance” appear to be used interchangeably, and there does not appear to be clarity among Implementation Partnerships of the distinction, if any, between the two.

From the perspective of some partnerships, the refocusing of the capacity building activities during Phase II was basically a switch of technical assistance being provided by Jenny Freeman versus being offered by the Boston PIC. Some have felt that the capacity building redefinition has meant another layer of reporting, rather than a helpful resource. Others view it as offering a pool of flexible funding to support any kind of additional work that ultimately supports each Implementation Partnership’s goals.

Although the Implementation Partnerships appreciate the mini- grants, the application process at times was felt to be onerous for the amount of money involved.

The mini-grants were the one part of the Capacity Building Component with which the Implementation Partnerships were generally quite satisfied. The Implementation Partnerships honed their analysis of their specific needs through the application process, and once funded could deal directly with the consultant(s) carrying out the technical work. Both of these factors appeared to have contributed to their overall satisfaction with the mini-grants.

The application process was challenging for some, however. In some cases, Jenny Freeman was able to assist the partnerships in drafting their applications, which reduced the burden of the application process. The partnerships’ comments also indicate that better upfront communications about the Funders’ expectations relative to each specific proposal would have helped. (For instance, representatives from Partners stated that they did not realize that they were expected to contribute half of the total cost until the day the application was due.)

The network of consultant referrals was appreciated by some Implementation Partnerships, but was met with some level of distrust by others.

The quality of the consultant referrals provided by Jenny Freeman was considered strong, and some appreciated the assistance in identifying resources. A few found the referrals too insular, however.

- “Our consultant, who was recommended by SkillWorks, has been wonderful. With her, we are moving forward.”
- “The consultant recommended to us had never done this type of work before. He was smart and dedicated, but not the most experienced.”
- “I was too busy to find my own consultant, so I just said yes to Jenny’s suggestion.”
- “It was clear to me that I was under no obligation to use Jenny’s suggestions so I appreciated her referrals but chose my own consultant.”

Group TA is difficult to deliver in a meaningful way because each Implementation Partnership views itself as being so different from the others.

Although a number of the Implementation Partnerships expressed a common interest in identifying an efficient career coaching model and/or in addressing sustainability issues, the grantees’ perceptions of the uniqueness of each partnership made it difficult to

address these issues with common training or research for the whole group. The following were cited as factors that limited the effectiveness of the group training and technical assistance that focused on funding research and career coaching training:

- “Our industry is different”
- “We are different because we are employer-driven”
- “The types of job opportunities available to our participants are different”
- “Our funding situation is so different”
- “We outsource our career coaching to an organization with deep expertise in this area. I trust their professional development.”
- “So much more research would be needed to understand the funding research to make it relevant to us”

The Career Coaching training is an example of the challenge entailed in a group approach. For a variety of reasons, each Implementation Partnership felt that the training didn’t meet their individual needs. PACE and HCC felt that it wasn’t applicable to the type of coaching they can offer. HCRTI views itself as having very experienced career coaches, and therefore felt the training was too basic. The Building Services projects out-sources career coaching to JVS because of the latter’s expertise, so the training didn’t feel fully relevant.

One of the lowest cost but most demanded forms of capacity building sought by the Implementation Partnerships is peer exchange.

Most of the partnership representative who were interviewed expressed a desire for more opportunities to share ideas, successes, and challenges among the Implementation Partnerships. The programs directors of the partnerships indicated that this could be most valuable if attendance was limited to the most senior leadership of the partnerships. The directors feel that they bring different sets of expertise and strengths that could be shared; they also yearn for some sort of benchmarks for their success that they hope could come out of joint conversations. They also mentioned the need for a feeling of solidarity and support from each other.

The sharing of exemplary national models in workforce development was also cited as a valuable group activity.

Both of the healthcare-related partnerships mentioned that this would be useful. The value of finding national models that presented truly cutting edge, novel ways of looking at workforce development was stressed. However, finding models that are of interest to each of the Implementation Partnerships, particularly those who feel “very different” in terms of industry structure, employer support, or career ladder opportunities, poses a challenge.

Perspectives of the SkillWorks Director, Capacity Building Consultant, and Funders Group Members of the Capacity Building Committee

The following attempts to summarize the perspectives of the Capacity Building Committee, including the SkillWorks Director and Capacity Building Consultant, relative to the Year 3 capacity-building activities.

Primary Objectives of Phase II of the Capacity Building Component (and a Comparison to Phase I)

The Committee members share a common view of Phase I as having focused on building organizational capacity on a broader scale, both within individual community-based organizations and across the CBO provider network, but felt it was not tied to the sectoral goals of SkillWorks. In contrast, they see the Phase II activities as being more focused on the funded Implementation Partnerships. In particular, the Year 3 capacity building activities are seen as an intentional effort to improve results of the funded partnerships to achieve their SkillWorks goals. The Year 3 activities also are seen as including an effort to formalize a structure for regular peer meetings among the partnerships.

Several respondents reported that they feel that the Committee has applied a very broad definition of “capacity building” in the Year 3 activities – including supporting a wide range of activities that grantees have requested. One committee member suggested that it would be worthwhile to have a more explicit discussion of the parameters of what constitutes “capacity building”, and how to prioritize funding decisions to the areas of greatest need. This individual initially thought the capacity-building funding should focus only on the partnerships that were struggling the most. Over the course of the year, this individual has seen the value of using the funding in strategic ways to help *all* the individual partnerships move to the next step and fill gaps in their services and operational competencies. However, in this individual’s view, there is still a question of whether the investments could be more strategically focused.

The Role (and Relative Value) of the Various Phase II Capacity Building Components

There appears to be a consensus among respondents that the individualized technical assistance¹¹ may have been the most effective element of the capacity-building activities to date in Year 3. The respondents recognized, however, the value of the initial needs assessment activities in establishing the context and setting priorities for all the subsequent capacity-building components.

A number of respondents felt that the mini-grants were the next most valuable capacity-building component. On the other hand, a few respondents felt that some of the activities funded through the mini-grants may not have reflected the most effective area of focus for the particular partnership, and feel that in some cases the mini-grants may have been used more to fill funding gaps than to address high priority, capacity-building issues. Some respondents are also deferring judgment of the value of these activities until the concrete results of the mini-grants are more evident. Overall, the respondents indicated that they felt that the mini-grants have been most effective when the capacity need to be addressed was “fully thought out” by the partnership. In this regard, many of the respondents were surprised at the amount of assistance some grantees required to develop their mini-grant proposals.

¹¹ This category includes the one-on-one technical assistance conducted by the SkillWorks Director, by the Capacity Building Consultant, and by the other technical consultants brought in by the latter.

A number of respondents reported hearing positive feedback relative to the group training activities, and feel that it has been useful in bringing the partnerships together. One respondent commented that these sessions have provided opportunities to expose the partnerships to successful models, practices and intermediaries from other regions; these are seen as helpful to show that other efforts are encountering similar challenges and thereby validating the partnerships' experiences.

On the other hand, a couple of respondents raised issues about how effective the group training has been in meeting the objectives of Phase II of the Capacity Building Component. For example, one respondent believes that the group training focused less on problem-solving, and more on building general knowledge; while knowledge building was seen as a good thing, the respondent was unsure how useful such activities have been in directly improving partnership results relative to their grant goals. Another respondent questioned the general value of group training in fostering capacity building within partnerships.

There were also some suggestions offered by respondents regarding ways to improve the content of specific group training sessions. One respondent indicated that, in hindsight, the session organizers probably could have done a better job in identifying exactly what partnerships were looking for from each group training session. As an example, this respondent indicated that it would have been better to offer the "management" session on coaching in the context of an industry partnership much sooner. This respondent also noted that there have been some problems relative to the time demands on partnerships resulting from the group training, in addition to their other SkillWorks responsibilities.

Effectiveness of the Capacity Building Committee in its Oversight Activities

There was a consensus among respondents that the Capacity Building Committee has done a good job at raising a lot of issues relative to partnership capacity, and beginning the process to address them. Respondents feel that the committee members have worked well together to debate and resolve issues, such as what activities were most appropriate for each partnership. They note that the majority of the committee members have been very actively engaged. In fact, in some respects, the committee members feel that they have been more intensively engaged in decision-making than they originally anticipated, particularly relative to the mini-grants. This caused one respondent to worry whether the partnerships may view the committee members as micro-managing the mini-grant application process. Another respondent wondered whether the committee has spent too much time examining the details of specific mini-grant proposals, and not enough time stepping back and looking at "the big picture" of how the mini-grants further the system change goals of SkillWorks. This individual wants to ensure that the committee strengthens its capacity-building focus on "high leverage/high return issues."

Overall, the committee members feel that the Capacity Building Consultant has done her best to "marry" the individualized needs raised by the partnerships with the operational and performance issues that the members of the Funders Group have prioritized. Most respondents feel that her efforts have resulted in a fairly good alignment between the two.

However, respondents recognize that initially there was some confusion experienced by partnerships about the technical assistance versus grants management functions – and time was needed to clarify these roles and for the Capacity Building Consultant to build trust with the partnerships. Some respondents also noted the challenge entailed in the Capacity Building Consultant both working with partnerships to develop their mini-grant requests and then helping the committee members to review these proposals. A question was raised about what her role should be in presenting the merits of the proposals to the committee – as an advocate for the partnerships or as an impartial assessor who could recommend denying a request?

A couple of committee members also noted that there has been no reporting to date on the results of the mini-grants from partnerships or from the Capacity Building Consultant. These respondents indicated that they would like to see some feedback loop instituted to make sure that the mini-grants are having a positive impact. One respondent suggested that this should be part of a larger year-end review of the results achieved by each partnership that would identify future capacity-building priorities for each partnership to focus on – whether through SkillWorks-supported technical assistance or on their own.

Key Lessons Learned

The respondents feel that the Phase II capacity building activities have proven to be a real asset for SkillWorks effort overall. They are seen as being very effective in responding to the capacity building needs that have been identified, and particularly in developing customized responses to the needs raised by partnerships. However, respondents agree that it is not yet clear whether these efforts have resulted in clear improvement in sustainable partnership capacity.

The capacity building activities also have provided an opportunity to more clearly and explicitly communicate the Funders Group's concerns and interests to the partnerships. The capacity-building activities have provided a forum to talk more honestly and directly with the partnerships about problems, outside of the context of a re-funding process that would make such communications more risky and perhaps more circumspect. One respondent stressed the value of the dialogue between the Capacity Building Committee representatives and the partnerships in establishing a tone of sharing struggles and challenges, and a common commitment to learning.

Because of the perspective garnered by the Capacity Building Committee relative to the partnerships' competencies and challenges, respondents have recommended that the Capacity Building Committee should meet periodically with the Implementation Partnership Committee to share insights. The Capacity Building Committee members feel that their experience should not only inform the work of other committees and partnership refunding decisions, but also help to guide SkillWorks overall relative to its broader systems change agenda.

For example, respondents indicate that the experience to date has shown the importance of building depth in leadership and champions within partnerships (at both providers and

employers) as a hedge against periodic turnover in key positions.¹² Related to this, some respondents have also noted that at times there is a belief that training and technical will help institutions fix problems when those methods will not work because there are bigger organizational issues at play. In part, this suggests the need for SkillWorks to pay more attention to who is leading the partnerships, a feature that may be much more critical to success than the provision of technical assistance.

One respondent also pointed to the increasing attention that the Phase II capacity-building activities have paid to improving the data collection and reporting systems of the partnerships. This individual stated that this was an area that the Funders Group probably should have devoted more attention to earlier. However, this individual also acknowledged that in the earlier stages of SkillWorks, the funders did not anticipate the extent of problems that many partnerships would have in collecting basic participant data and reporting on a common set of outcomes.

There is a general recognition among respondents about the need to focus more attention on partnership sustainability.¹³ Sustainability was identified as a priority issue in the initial Phase II assessments; however, some members of the Capacity Building Committee are concerned that the availability of 4th year SkillWorks funding may have diminished the sense of urgency of some partnerships to focus on sustainability issues as aggressively as they would have otherwise. This was seen as another example of the need to have more conversations across SkillWorks committees to inform and coordinate decision-making (and to better anticipate the implications of decisions).

One committee member emphasized how important it was for the Capacity Building Committee (and other SkillWorks committees) to continue to surface and address any disconnects between what the partnerships want to do and the Funders Group's priorities.

Based on the experience to date with the Phase II activities, some committee members also would like to see more screening of the mini-grant applications by the SkillWorks Director and Capacity Building Consultant before the proposals come to the Capacity Building Committee. These committee members believe that the Director and Consultant should request revisions, and even turn down some requests as inappropriate, prior to full committee review.

How the Experiences of Phase II Suggest the Potential to Move SkillWorks Practices to Scale

The respondents stressed the importance of looking at the Phase II capacity-building experience and seeing how to apply the approach and lessons on a broader scale. For some respondents, this means becoming more deliberate about which capacity-building strategies and investments can help improve the overall potential of SkillWorks practices to achieve sustainability and system-wide impact. One committee member voiced the

¹² One respondent argued that the experience across partnerships of turnover in a range of key staff positions points to the importance of establishing "bench strength" for all critical positions.

¹³ A group training on "Sustainability 101" was scheduled for November 2006.

concern that, without the “carrot” of SkillWorks funding, it is unclear how well the partnerships will be in maintaining their capacities and competencies, much less taking those practices to a broader scale. For this respondent, this situation suggested the need to focus future SkillWorks capacity-building activities on the design of partnerships that won’t require as much intensive technical assistance on an on-going basis. Other respondents urged creating more strategic partnerships with community colleges, or focusing on larger organizations that are less fragile financially and have more potential both to sustain themselves and to leverage larger efforts. One respondent opined that the focus needs to shift to promoting changes in employer practices.

Another common theme was using the SkillWorks capacity-building funds to build better connections between the Implementation Partnerships and the public policy component, as an approach to promoting system changes.

Committee members also stressed the importance of ensuring that the partnerships have a clear commitment both to worker advancement and to systems change as part of their core mission. One respondent emphasized the importance of providing guidance to the partnerships on system change strategies (such as through advocacy training) to improve their capacity in this area.

A respondent also stressed that fact that, to date, the Phase II capacity-building activities have been very internally oriented, and not about strengthening the field. This individual feels that it is now time to look to ways to disseminate the best practices that have been identified, as a method for having wider influence and impact. The respondent suggested that SkillWorks should be exploring ways to share the research¹⁴ and learnings from its capacity building activities (perhaps through a website) so that more practitioners and policymakers can benefit from these efforts.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Over the last year, the individuals directing the Capacity Building Component¹⁵ have sought to achieve a balance between addressing the capacity building priorities identified by the SkillWorks funders, managers, and evaluation team, and those that the Implementation Partnerships themselves have articulated. This is a very challenging balance to achieve.

We have seen, for example, that the partnerships rate the mini-grants as the “most valuable” capacity building element, because it provides an opportunity to address the needs that they have specifically defined and because they can directly select and/or supervise the consultant(s) that do the work. Some members of the Capacity Building Committee, on the other hand, have questioned the strategic value of some of the activities funded under the mini-grants. For the Capacity Building Committee, the “most

¹⁴ One example that the respondent offered was the research conducted on wage and tip issues in calculating true income in the hospitality industry.

¹⁵ That is, the SkillWorks Director, the Capacity Building Consultant, and the members of the Capacity Building Committee of the Funders Group.

valuable” capacity building element has been the individualized technical assistance provided by the SkillWorks Director, the Capacity Building Consultant, and the subcontractors that the latter has mobilized. The high rating given to these activities by the Capacity Building Committee probably is closely related to the fact that these activities are more likely to be addressing issues that the Funders Group has identified as priority capacity concerns.

Nonetheless, despite some criticism from the Implementation Partnerships – who of course would favor a more flexible, demand-driven, less directive approach to these activities – on balance the Capacity Building Component has done a fairly good job at balancing these the interests of the various stakeholders with its range of capacity building activities.

Related to this, is it also clear that it has taken awhile to establish the role of the Capacity Building Consultant (especially her role vis a vis the SkillWorks Director), to communicate what forms of assistance she can provide, and for her to establish a relationship of trust with the individual Implementation Partnerships. As noted above, the Implementation Partnerships would prefer to receive technical assistance from someone who reports to them exclusively. However, the formal role defined for Ms. Freeman requires her to be attentive to the interests of *both* the partnerships and the Funders Group. This means that it is almost inevitable that at times one party or the other will feel that she is not going far enough in advocating for their position. However, the progress being made by the Implementation Partnerships in addressing the capacity-building priorities – both their own and those defined for them by SkillWorks – suggests that Ms. Freeman has been effective in her Capacity Building Consultant role.

However, it would be useful if SkillWorks could provide the partnerships with more explicit written guidance on the distinctions in (and separation of) the roles of the SkillWorks Director and Capacity Building Consultant. There will always be some overlap between contract management/performance issues and capacity-building activities (particularly given the objectives that have been defined for the Phase II activities). But it may be possible to specify the types of issues that the SkillWorks Director will exclusively address, and those that the Capacity Building Consultant will have the primary responsibility for addressing and resolving. In cases when both will be involved, it will be helpful if the SkillWorks Director can be more explicit about when the task has been formally “handed off” to the Capacity Building Consultant to handle. Also, if she is not doing so already, it would be beneficial for the Capacity Building Consultant to be explicit with the partnerships about what sorts of information that she will be obligated to share with the SkillWorks Director and funders, and the types of information from partnerships that she will treat as confidential.

We have also seen considerable variation across grantees in the partnerships’ openness to accept capacity building technical assistance. Unless a partnership can get over its defensiveness and make a good-faith commitment to the capacity building effort, the technical assistance is not likely to have the intended positive impact. As noted, the Capacity Building Consultant has worked hard over Year 3 to establish a relationship of

trust with the individual partnerships, and has had considerable success in this area. However, the turnover in senior staff positions in several of the partnerships means that more work will need to be done to re-establish strong working relationships with some partnerships. The experience to date also suggests that for the individualized technical assistance activities to be successful it will be critical for the partnerships to have regular direct communication not only with the Capacity Building Consultant, but also with any subcontractors that the latter engages for these activities.

Our assessment (and the feedback from participants) indicates that the group training was the least successful element of the Phase II capacity building activities to date. The technical assistance research literature shows – and the SkillWorks experience during the last year confirms – that although group training for organizations can expose entities to general principles, it is very hard to use this approach to address the specific circumstances of individual organizations. Only one-on-one technical assistance can do this. Therefore, in the future, SkillWorks might consider explicitly pairing its group training activities with opportunities for one-on-one TA follow-up. These one-on-one TA sessions can be used as opportunities to translate the general principles from the group training into the unique institutional and cultural context faced by each organization. These individual sessions can also be used to reinforce the application of these principles in the participating organizations.

Another clear message that emerged from our assessment was how highly the partnerships value opportunities for peer networking. The group training sessions were seen as one way of promoting such networking, but the partnerships should be consulted relative to other mechanisms that might be used to foster such peer interaction.

There was a question raised by several partnerships regarding the extent to which the Phase II “capacity building” activities conducted to date are different from the typical types of technical assistance or management oversight provided to grantees. More precisely, to what extent do these activities represent a separate, “capacity building” component, versus simply being a (grants management) element of the Implementation Partnership component? In focusing the activities exclusively on the existing partnerships, the capacity building efforts look more like the latter rather than the former. Moreover, several Capacity Building Committee members questioned whether some of the capacity-building activities, particularly some of the mini-grants, were sufficiently “strategic” in focus. Accordingly, it would be useful for the Capacity Building Committee to use its review of this mid-year assessment to have a detailed discussion of the definition of “capacity building” and the parameters of the most appropriate activities to fund in the future.

Finally, the Phase II capacity building experience to date raises another question: if the selected partnerships have needed extensive technical assistance and capacity building to achieve their goals, what does this say about the potential to take their improved practices to scale throughout the workforce development system? Doesn't it imply that it is critical for there to be an ongoing source of capacity-building assistance available to organizations on a system-wide basis, and shouldn't this be an element of the SkillWorks

policy agenda? We believe that the Capacity Building Committee and the overall Funders Group should explicitly address this question as part of developing the SkillWorks policy agenda.

Appendix:

Protocol for Partnership Interviews

Capacity Building Plans/Priorities

- Could you describe the process used to develop a capacity building plan/priorities for your organization?
 - How was the Skillworks capacity building consultant, Jenny Freeman, involved?
 - Did you discuss your capacity building priorities with the other Partnerships?
 - What type of internal discussions did you have with staff and/or board members?
 - Did you rely on information arising from the SkillWorks evaluation?
- How did you decide what pieces would be handled by joint capacity building activities, what pieces could be handled by one-on-one consulting with the Skillworks capacity building consultant, Jenny Freeman, and which pieces you would need to seek external consulting assistance?
- Did you have such a plan or set of priorities, formal or informal, prior to the introduction of the capacity building planning for your Partnerships in 2006?
- How did you prioritize which activities to pursue first?

Individualized Technical Assistance with Skillworks CB consultant (Jenny Freeman)

- How have you used the Skillworks capacity building consultant, Jenny Freeman, to assist in your capacity building efforts?
- How often do you have contact with Jenny Freeman?
- What issues do you address with Loh-Sze Leung versus Jenny Freeman? Is it clear which issues are appropriate for which individual?

- Are there other forms or types of assistance that would be useful for the Skillworks consultant to provide?
- What were the specific outcomes of your work with the Skillworks consultant?
- What was the primary benefit of the technical assistance provided?
- What did you learn as a result of the technical assistance with the Skillworks consultant?
- How has it changed day-to-day operations at the Partnership?
- How have the capabilities of your staff changed?
- Are there any lessons from your experience that would be applicable to other Partnerships or even to other entities not part of Skillworks? If so, are there any plans to share those lessons?
- How would you have addressed these issues if the Skillworks capacity building consultant were not available?

Individualized Technical Assistance Grants

Grant Application Process

- How many TA grant applications have you submitted?
- Were you told how many times in a year you could apply for funds?
- How did the topic you chose for the grant relate to your capacity building plan?
- How would you have addressed these issues if the technical assistance grants were not available?
- Did you receive any assistance in the development of your grant application?

- What type of dialogue did you have with the Capacity Building subcommittee, Loh-Sze Leung, or Jenny Freeman during the application process?
- How did you choose the consulting expertise needed to complete the project?

Implementation

- Once you received approval, how quickly did you begin your project?
- Could you describe the activities you pursued?
- How did the actual capacity building activities differ from what you anticipated in your grant application?
- Were you able to complete the activities within the anticipated time frame?
- Who from the Partnership (Director, staff, board, CBOs, employers) was involved in the capacity building activity?
- Were you satisfied with the quality of consulting assistance you received?
- What type of ongoing dialogue did you have with the capacity building committee, Loh-Sze Leung, or Jenny Freeman during the implementation of the technical assistance grant?

Outcomes

- What were the specific outcomes of your the technical assistance grants?
- What was the primary benefit of the technical assistance provided? Were there other benefits?
- What did you learn as a result of this technical assistance project?
- How has it changed day to day operations at the Partnership?

- Did the technical assistance fully address the need originally identified?
- How have the capabilities of your staff changed?
- Are there any lessons from your experience that would be applicable to other Partnerships or even to other entities not part of Skillworks? If so, are there any plans to share those lessons?
- How have you shared the results of your project with the capacity building committee, Loh-Sze Leung, or Jenny Freeman since implementation was completed?
- Do you plan to submit another application this year?

Group Capacity Building Activities

- How often did you meet with the other Partnerships prior to the introduction of the capacity building program in 2006? What other mechanisms existed for peer learning and information sharing?
- I would like to get your feedback on each of the group capacity building activities ...

Event	Attend (Y/N)	Useful? (5 Very Useful, 3 Somewhat Useful, 1 Not Useful)	How have you made use of the information?
April Meeting on system change goals and new quarterly report			
Training on Business Value Assessment Tool			
Document on public funding sources			
May retreat			
Career coaching training for coaches (Apr – June)			
Career coaching peer exchange for project managers			
Meeting on priorities of Workforce Training Fund			

Interview Protocol for Members of Capacity Building Subcommittee

(SkillWorks Director, Capacity Building Consultant, and representatives from the SkillWorks Funders Group)

1. What do you see as the primary objectives of the Capacity Building Component during Year 3 of SkillWorks?
 - What would you characterize as the difference(s) in the focus of Phase II of the Capacity Building component from Phase I of the component (when it was a largely separate effort overseen directly by the Rockefeller Foundation)?
2. Please comment on each component of the Capacity Building activities during the period of December 2005 through June 2006
[First confirm that the following are the main elements in the Year 3 Capacity Building component (add others as necessary)]:
 - Identification of partnership-specific and cross-partnership capacity building needs, and development of preliminary partnership capacity building plans
 - Provision of group training
 - Provision of one-on-one technical assistance
 - Mini-grants
 - Others?]
 - Please describe what you feel is the relative importance of each of these components, what has been accomplished, and what have been the challenges
3. How effective do you feel that the Capacity Building Committee (and the overall Funders Group) has been in establishing a focus for the Capacity Building activities, and for overseeing those activities during Year 3?
4. What were the key lessons learned so far? Have these lessons led to revisions in the Capacity Building component?
5. Looking to the future of SkillWorks, what does the Capacity Building experience suggest about the potential to take the practices of SkillWorks to a broader scale, systems-wide?