

III.

Gaps and Opportunities in Greater Boston's Workforce Development Ecosystem

As these practices and examples demonstrate, there is much good work to be lauded across the Greater Boston workforce development ecosystem. Over the course of our research, workforce providers, jobseekers, and employers all

emphasized there is room for improvement, too. The following section summarizes some of the gaps and opportunities we surfaced. Note that we use the terms “workforce development system” and “ecosystem” here to refer to the many individuals and institutions that have a hand in what it means to work in the Greater Boston region (workers, employers, workforce providers, government, education, philanthropy, etc.)—and the relationships among them.

The gaps and opportunities outlined below reflect our research's focus on workforce providers: These are primarily from the perspective of workforce providers, or about workforce providers or relationships with workforce providers. In other words, this is not a comprehensive assessment of policy, the role of higher education, philanthropy, etc. Even so, our research made it clear that **all parts of the system—public, private, and nonprofit—have a role to play in creating a framework that works better for both jobseekers and employers.** Here are some ways to help all players strengthen their roles.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORKFORCE PROVIDERS

Adopt the relevant Next-Gen practices outlined in this report.

First and simply, the region could benefit from greater adoption of the leading practices outlined here given

“[The ideal workforce provider] consistently communicates, sets expectations, and prepares and presents jobseekers with a high likelihood of being hired and retained.”

– BETH ISRAEL DEACONESS
MEDICAL CENTER STAFF

their demonstrated impact among workforce providers (as corroborated by employers and jobseekers). As previously mentioned, we are not suggesting that every workforce provider should adopt every practice included. However, they should carefully consider

which practices they might adopt themselves and which they might partner with others on to drive better results for both employers and jobseekers.

Demonstrate the quality of impact to both employers and jobseekers.

Greater adoption of leading practices means nothing if their impact cannot be communicated to workforce providers' “customers”: jobseekers and employers. This communication could be aided by:

- Robust data management systems for participant tracking and impact analysis
- Strong marketing and communications expertise/tools to support storytelling
- Standards to create a common language across providers and employers (e.g., shared definitions of metrics for impact)

Collaborate with other workforce providers.

Given the depth of need and similarity in services across workforce providers, collaboration could yield greater efficacy and efficiency. Areas that seem particularly ripe for collaboration include:

- Streamlined participant recruitment, e.g., create partnerships to help refer “overflow” applicants, or those who would be better suited for another program

- Shared participant outcomes, e.g., agree to track the same metrics as others and share data as permitted to improve regional analysis and holistic tracking of participants' journeys
- Collective employer engagement, e.g., bring a singular point of contact and collective voice to employers to influence employer practices and/or simplify employer partnering

Note: Workforce providers are often disincentivized, implicitly and explicitly, from collaborating due to competition for, and/or restrictions on, funding. See Opportunities across the System, next page, for further detail.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EMPLOYERS

Update hiring, retention, and advancement practices.

Continuously and intentionally assessing the ways workers are recruited, trained, supported, and promoted can help employers identify “leakage” points for talent and improve their overall talent strategy, driving operational efficiencies. This might include:

- Regularly reviewing institutionalized hiring practices and opportunities to adjust job descriptions or requirements (e.g., eliminate unnecessary degree requirements to broaden the eligible talent pool)
- Increasing transparency for jobseekers along the application process (e.g., more communications on application status, sharing feedback on the interviewing process as appropriate)
- Emphasizing retention and advancement practices, especially for frontline workers (e.g., through incumbent worker training, career pathways, mentorship programs, and/or incentives)
- Offering specialized training for managers of untapped talent to help ensure new hires are set up for success

Deepen relationships with workforce providers.

The employers we spoke to universally described their most positive experiences with workforce providers as the ones in which they had a deep and trusting relationship. Just as we encourage workforce providers to “foster deep and strategic employer partnerships” (Leading Practice A), we encourage employers to reciprocate and develop deep, mutual partnerships to fill business needs. This might entail:

- Getting involved in workforce programs early on to influence program outreach and recruiting
- Crafting customized trainings with workforce providers and compensating them as appropriate
- Developing talent supplier agreements to support talent placement following programs

Collaborate with other employers.

As the tight labor market drives more and more employers to consider new workforce practices, the time is ripe for employers to learn from and partner with one another for the long term, especially on openings for entry-level roles. Employers might collaborate and propel business growth by:

- Sharing best practices and/or creating coalitions to support untapped talent and advocate for specific workforce policies
- Coordinating partnerships with workforce providers
- Identifying roles of shared need (e.g., nurse practitioners) and working closely with workforce providers to design or adapt training programs to prepare untapped talent

Note: All of these opportunities for employers require investment of resources. While this investment will most likely need to come foremost from employers themselves (there are dedicated bodies of work on the topic of treating workers as an investment, not an expense; see, for instance, Zeynep Ton’s Good Jobs Strategy),²¹ this is also an area

“Employers spend a great deal of time, energy, and money finding talent, and they may be overlooking programs right in their backyard that could provide it.”

– JUST-A-START STAFF

where philanthropic and/or government funders can help support employers in developing these practices.

OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE SYSTEM

Eliminate systemic barriers to sustained employment.

We repeatedly heard about the many barriers outside of work that affect a person's ability to work. At the Monitor Institute by Deloitte, we have been increasingly referring to these barriers as "social determinants of work" (inspired by the well-known concept of "social determinants of health," which refers to the external conditions that affect a person's health).²² While these largely fall under the purview of government assistance programs and other human service providers, some of these can also be addressed by workforce providers (e.g., through their wraparound services or partnerships) and employers (e.g., via expanded employee benefits and assistance or policy/advocacy). Some of the most notable suggestions we heard regarding systemic barriers or social determinants of work include:

- Explore public transportation alternatives, such as workforce providers and employers subsidizing transit costs for participants and/or partnering with private sector rideshare services to offer discounts
- Consider ways to increase access to affordable child care
- Lower housing costs and increase share of affordable housing
- Address benefits "cliff effect" (the abrupt tapering off or loss of benefits that can occur when household earnings increase; this can be very disruptive for poor families because earnings have usually not increased enough to offset the need for benefits or create complete self-sufficiency)^{23, 24}

Create additional avenues or programs for basic skills instruction.

Relatedly, both employers and workforce providers emphasized the importance of adult basic education to lay the foundation for additional training and skills development. While some workforce providers offer (or provide referrals for) such services today, increasing the reach of these programs via government or education institutions could help prepare more jobseekers in Greater Boston for work. The basic skills we heard most needed include:

- English language
- Basic administrative and computer skills, and comfort with digital tools
- Financial literacy
- Basic professional/job readiness skills (e.g., punctuality, dress codes)

In addition, there is a need for stronger bridge programs or "onramps" from these basic skills trainings into more advanced courses (such as the ones offered by several Next-Gen Workforce Providers highlighted in this report). Training providers, education institutions, and the government can help foster this connectivity.

Increase attention to social justice and access issues underlying workforce development.

Underlying the broader challenge of access to good work is the more fundamental issue of inequity in access to opportunity. While most workforce providers are actively trying to tackle this challenge, it is important to call out these issues as areas for ongoing and increased attention across the ecosystem. Some specific opportunities we heard include:

- Increasing the diversity of leadership among workforce providers
- Incorporating program participant feedback loops into workforce provider programming

"Finding work is competitive in Boston; I wish Boston had a better system in place to access jobs."

– YEAR UP JOBSEEKER

"People already face so many barriers [outside of work], we need to reduce the barriers for people seeking employment."

– IINE STAFF

- Building the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures at employers (e.g., conducting implicit bias trainings)
- Addressing policy and systemic barriers at the local, state, and federal government levels that disproportionately affect people of color and other minorities

Coordinate funding and align incentives.

Given the need for greater collaboration across workforce providers and others, philanthropic funders should be wary of practices that foster competition and further fracture the nonprofit field. Helpful funding practices we heard include:

- Providing funding for collaboration, e.g., partnerships, shared outcomes, development of standards for common language, field-level convening
- Providing unrestricted funding, i.e., allow workforce providers to invest in their strengths vs. allocating funding to a restricted set of activities (which often inhibits them from building out vital capabilities traditionally considered to be “overhead,” e.g., technology, good wages, professional development)
- Acknowledging and investing in the resources required to support process improvements, capacity building, and systems change (needed for both workforce providers and employers)
- Increased collaboration with other funders to create a more collective and strategic workforce development strategy (e.g., SkillWorks’ workforce funder collaborative and the Project Catapult Fund)

Improve connection and understanding across the system.

Given the scale and complexity of workforce development, it is little surprise that we consistently heard the need for better coordination among the many actors. A few specific ideas that surfaced include:

- Coalition-building and data-sharing across sectors to help ensure jobseekers are understood and referred appropriately to needed workforce and wraparound services

- Stronger public sector engagement from workforce providers (e.g., individual/collective advocacy, partnerships with public sector workforce organizations like the Workforce Solutions Group and the Job Training Alliance)^{25, 26}
- Closer partnerships and pipelines between education institutions (e.g., community colleges), youth networks, employers, and workforce providers

It is important to recognize that even though we use the terms *system* and *ecosystem* for convenience, they suggest a level of coordination (or perhaps a mechanism for it) that does not currently exist. As one of our interviewees put it, “What ecosystem? We don’t have an ecosystem. We have organizations that get together and funders that try to consolidate, but we’re missing coherence.” Another agreed, “Everyone recognizes these systems should work together more across a continuum of care, but there’s a lack of cohesion around what that solution is and not a centralized point to have that conversation.”

This broader challenge—the lack of system itself—is one that Project Catapult hopes to explore, at the very least by raising it with others for further interrogation. The more complex a challenge is, the more it requires the power of many to create change; we know we cannot do this work alone.²⁷



We hope this report can be a tool for conversation and collaboration: for workforce providers to see opportunities for learning, leading, and partnership; for employers to identify and support new sources of untapped talent; and for funders and public sector actors to bolster the good work happening today and facilitate coordination across the field.

Let’s create a Boston that works—for today and tomorrow.