

Leading Practices for Next-Gen Workforce Providers

Introduction

On the following pages, we share 14 leading practices that emerged through our interviews and site visits with select Next-Gen Workforce Providers (listed on page 12) in Greater Boston, supplemented through interviews with local employers and jobseekers. These practices are organized against the four-competency framework described above and are intended to help workforce providers learn from one another. For each of the four competencies, we provide an overview with supporting employer and jobseeker perspectives, then detail the leading practices beneath that competency with descriptions and examples.

Specifically, the sections headed “Bringing This to Life” provide in-depth looks at how certain Next-Gen Workforce Providers are leading in a given practice today, and include “Other Notable Examples,” which briefly highlight how other Next-Gen Workforce Providers we spoke with are also differentiated in that practice. These examples are not intended as the only or best approaches to the practices we present; rather, they are tangible examples of how these practices come to life. The information in the “Bringing This to Life” and “Other Notable Examples” sections was sourced directly from our exchanges with the featured organizations themselves.

It is also important to consider that not every organization needs to lead on every practice; some of these capabilities can and should come through increased coordination with other workforce providers. Moreover, these leading practices are by no means exhaustive; they are a compilation of observations across a limited set of interviews. There are other Next-Gen Workforce Providers in Boston that are not featured in this report; we welcome others to continue this work to help illuminate other Next-Gen Workforce Providers and leading practices

in Greater Boston in order to cultivate the most effective and coordinated workforce development system possible for workers and employers, in times of economic prosperity and downturn alike.

Catapult Competency I: Being Market Responsive

COMPETENCY OVERVIEW

Many workforce providers in Boston are focused on building the region’s supply of talent. As stated in *The Catapult Papers*, “Throughout its modern history, workforce development has been largely a human-service endeavor built in the context of the anti-poverty drive of the early and mid-1960s.”¹⁰ Sometimes this results in an emphasis on training jobseekers without a clear understanding of what employers need. Being market responsive requires workforce providers to look at the demand side of the equation and design programs around employer needs, lest they turn out program participants who are still unprepared to fill the roles employers have available. In turn, employers should consider paying for workforce providers’ services, recognizing them as a critical part of their talent supply chain. Market responsiveness also involves keeping a critical eye on changes in the market and shifting course quickly to adapt.

Employers that were interviewed underscored how important it is that workforce providers deeply understand and respond to their needs. For example, when Levy Restaurants started participating in union contracts, it turned to Next-Gen Workforce Provider BEST Hospitality Training. Levy partnered with BEST to help fill new job openings as well as create a solid training program for new and seasoned staff. BEST, a partner of the hotel union UNITE HERE Local 26, had a deep understanding of both union and Levy management needs, and of how to effectively train

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (BFIT) is an urban college serving the Greater Boston region and committed to student success and career readiness in technology fields.

BEST HOSPITALITY TRAINING combines pre-employment and incumbent worker training designed to meet the labor needs of its hotel partners and the personal and professional goals of UNITE HERE Local 26 union members.

CONNECT helps people achieve sustainable living wage jobs and financial health and well-being by partnering to provide essential skills, knowledge, and social capital in one central and supportive location.

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF NEW ENGLAND (IINE) seeks to create opportunities for refugees and immigrants to succeed through resettlement, education, career advancement, and pathways to citizenship.

JEWISH VOCATIONAL SERVICE (JVS) works to enhance the education and skills of working-age adults—who often have limited English language, skills, and income—and to meet the hiring, retention, and talent development needs of employers.

JUST-A-START (JAS) is a multi-service community development corporation (CDC) that creates and maintains affordable housing, provides housing resources and services, offers education and workforce training for youth and adults, and builds community engagement.

MORE THAN WORDS (MTW) is a nonprofit social enterprise that “empowers young adults who are in the foster care system, court-involved, homeless, or out of school to take charge of their lives by taking charge of a business.”

NEW ENGLAND CENTER FOR ARTS & TECHNOLOGY (NECAT) empowers adults facing barriers to employment through training in culinary skills, social-emotional development, and career readiness for success and long-term financial stability.

OPERATION ABLE’s mission is to provide employment and training opportunities to mature workers and others from economically, racially, and occupationally diverse backgrounds.

PER SCHOLAS prepares motivated and curious adults who are unemployed or underemployed for successful careers as technology professionals and creates onramps to businesses in need of their talents.

RESILIENT CODERS is a workforce intermediary nonprofit that trains young people of color for high growth careers as software engineers and connects them with jobs in the Boston-area technology sector.

UTECH aspires to “ignite and nurture the ambition of disconnected young people to trade violence and poverty for social and economic success.”

YEAR UP is a one-year, intensive training program that empowers talented and motivated young adults to move from minimum wage to meaningful careers.

jobseekers in hospitality and best-in-class customer service. According to a Levy director, “When I say I really need customer service, BEST gets it.” And, BEST has been willing and able to rapidly evolve its trainings to “move toward Next-Gen service” standards. BEST has become a reliable partner for Levy’s talent needs in today’s tight labor market, providing candidates who can get the job done.¹¹

Particularly as high-skill, high-wage occupations (e.g., in financial services, information technology, health care) expand in Boston, it is critical for Next-Gen Workforce Providers to remain agile in the face of these fast-moving industries and find the “sweet spot” between employers and workers.^{12,13} This can include fostering deep, strategic employer and industry partnerships; being nimble in the face of regional and economic changes; and creating talent supplier agreements with employers, possibly including customized employer training. Examples of leading practices as they relate to this competency are shared below.

LEADING PRACTICE A: **FOSTERING DEEP AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH EMPLOYERS AND/OR INDUSTRIES**

A key aspect of being market responsive as a Next-Gen Workforce Provider is demonstrating strong employer engagement. This means moving away from transactional interactions with employers and toward deep and strategic partnerships with employers and industries. In practice, this can look like:

- Creating an Employer Advisory Council or similar consortia that allows employers to buy into the program (i.e., by seeing the inner workings of the program and building relationships with participants) and provides ongoing input and support for programs (e.g., through mock interviews, resume reviews, training facilitation, donations)

“The ideal [workforce provider] partner is flexible, willing to learn together, and does not try to direct us into something that doesn’t make sense for our business. They understand that we are unable to commit to taking everyone and help us find the right match between candidate and position.”

– PARTNERS HEALTH CARE SYSTEM STAFF

- Having a dedicated employer engagement liaison or team to oversee all employer relationships. This helps Next-Gen Workforce Providers to set clear expectations and maintain strong communications with employers, which employers highly value

- Engaging with employers to understand their talent needs and presenting the right candidates to fill those needs

Next-Gen Workforce Providers that excel in this practice truly know how to embed themselves with employers and effectively connect jobseekers to them to fill employers’ business needs.

— BRINGING THIS TO LIFE —

BEST HOSPITALITY TRAINING BEST has established itself as a strategic partner to hospitality employers in the Greater Boston region in several ways. Over the last 10 years, it has built an Employer Advisory Council with 38 dedicated hotel partners; these partners through a Labor Management Trust Fund pay for incumbent worker services and are deeply involved in curriculum design (sometimes offering to teach classes). According to employer partners, BEST is highly communicative, organized, and flexible—keeping jobseeker training programs current and relevant and supplying employers with dependable talent.

“Working closely with employers is the bedrock of our programming. All of our curriculum is developed with our employers.”

– BEST STAFF

“BEST holds quarterly Advisory Council meetings where we can get a sense of what BEST is doing in terms of training and what’s going on in the rest of the city.”

– OMNI HOTELS STAFF

YEAR UP Year Up has built out several mechanisms for engaging with 250+ employers (including 41 of the Fortune 100), such as national and local Corporate Engagement and Account Management teams that work to initiate and cultivate employer relationships. Year Up also launched Grads of Life, which works with employers to provide resources for recruiting, hiring and retaining young people aged 16–24 who are not in school or working, known as Opportunity Youth. Year Up works closely with employers to understand job descriptions and skill needs for open roles, and often integrates these skills into training programs. For several employers (including long-time partner J.P. Morgan Chase & Co., interviewed for this report), Year Up has become a major talent pipeline, providing the opportunity to leverage untapped talent from non-traditional education backgrounds alongside recruiting channels with colleges and universities. Year Up partners cite a 90% satisfaction rate with the workforce provider.

“We bring employers in to ask how they would build curriculum, and ensure we’re continually responding to changes in the workplace and required skills.”

– YEAR UP STAFF

“Year Up regularly takes our feedback on desired skillsets and integrates it into their curriculum. They also attend our intern presentations here on site.”

– J.P. MORGAN CHASE & CO. STAFF

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- PER SCHOLAS offers a robust corporate engagement model, allowing employers the opportunity to volunteer (e.g., conduct mock interviews with students), invest in the program, hire program participants, customize trainings, and recycle old computers for participant use.
- NEW ENGLAND CENTER FOR ARTS & TECHNOLOGY (NECAT) has developed an Employer Advisory Council to inform curriculum design and to review employer hiring practices. NECAT is intentional about working with employers with similar values that will provide well-paying jobs to participants.

- BENJAMIN FRANKLIN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (BFIT) has a career services department where each team member is responsible for helping students find part- or full-time jobs within a specific major. The team focuses on building deep relationships with employers and finding or creating openings for BFIT students.
- OPERATION ABLE’s staff is dedicated to developing internship opportunities with employers, bringing employers in for presentations and volunteer support, and connecting program participants to job openings.
- JVS BOSTON is a “go-to” partner, according to employers like Partners HealthCare System. JVS seeks to understand employer needs quickly and “fine-tunes their sourcing,” narrowing down from multiple hundred candidates to find the best match for employers and jobseekers.

LEADING PRACTICE B: BEING NIMBLE IN RESPONSE TO REGIONAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES

Being truly market responsive also requires looking beyond specific employers and paying attention to broader market shifts and needs. Many Next-Gen Workforce Providers conduct sensing activities regularly to understand how the market is changing and which industries face the greatest labor demands locally; they continuously adjust programming and partnerships to fill these demands.

This responsiveness is a quality that we heard is valued by both jobseekers and employers. For jobseekers, this means connecting them to good jobs (as defined based on the needs of the target population) that are sustainable and well-paying in the long term. For employers, this means program participants are prepared with new and necessary skillsets.

BRINGING THIS TO LIFE

JUST-A-START JAS’s flagship Biomedical Careers Program has focused on the high-growth biomedical field in Boston for over 27 years. The free, 9-month program provides specialized instruction to place jobseekers in biotech, life sciences, and medical research roles, with a nearly 100% placement rate. JAS

also recently launched an IT Careers Program to respond to growing market demands; through this course, students can obtain stackable industry-recognized credentials, which is essential in tech where needs are constantly changing. JAS consistently refines both programs with employer input, and partners with Bunker Hill Community College to ensure the courses offer hands-on learning opportunities for students to grow their skillsets.

"We keep our programs relevant, current, and effective so students can get sustaining careers (more than just jobs)."

— JUST-A-START STAFF

"The program pushes you in the right direction, guides you, and opens up pathways."

— JUST-A-START IT CAREERS PROGRAM STUDENT (FROM 2018 ANNUAL REPORT)

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- BFIT offers a number of technical degree programs (e.g., computer technology, construction management) and employer partnerships in response to market needs for high-demand fields, and consistently looks into opportunities to grow its range of programs.
- YEAR UP reassesses legacy partnerships and shifts programming to teach jobseekers new skills as some jobs at legacy partners become automated. Because talent oftentimes lives outside the city, Year Up has also partnered with local community colleges such as North Shore Community College and Roxbury Community College to deliver programming in more places outside of downtown Boston.
- PER SCHOLAS and RESILIENT CODERS, as tech-focused Next-Gen Workforce Providers, constantly evolve their curriculum to match the tech market's needs, adding new credential offerings and customized trainings as required skillsets change.

LEADING PRACTICE C: CREATING TALENT SUPPLIER AGREEMENTS, INCLUDING CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYER TRAINING

One of the most impactful actions that a Next-Gen Workforce Provider can take is to develop internship and/or full-time talent supplier agreements with employers, such that employers commit to dedicating a number of openings for the workforce provider's program participants. As long as the workforce provider can promise a steady stream of qualified and dedicated program participants, this can also help relieve the recruiting burden on employers. For the workforce provider, this may require a mindset shift from being a community-based organization that encourages employers to hire their jobseekers to acting as an intentional talent supplier.

Next-Gen Workforce Providers can make these talent supplier agreements even more appealing to employers through fee-for-service customized training. They may work with employers to understand skill gaps and dedicate a module of their curriculum to teaching those skills to make jobseekers more attractive for specific job openings; and employers can signal value by paying for this level of customization. Nonetheless, the broader curriculum should focus on more generally applicable skills so that jobseekers can walk away with a strong resume and transferrable skills, especially in cases where talent supplier agreements are not in place for jobseekers to join a particular employer after the program.

BRINGING THIS TO LIFE

BEST HOSPITALITY TRAINING BEST offers a 2,000-hour Housekeeping Apprenticeship Program registered with the Massachusetts Department of Labor. It starts with BEST's Pre-Apprenticeship Training Program, and upon completion graduates earn nine college credits and are hired as apprentices at partner hotels. If they successfully finish the apprenticeship, they earn a nationally recognized certification from the MA DOL and three additional credits at Bunker Hill Community College. Employers say BEST frequently involves them in developing training curricula focused on the needs of both the incumbent workers and jobseekers served in their

programs. BEST's talent supplier agreements via the apprenticeship program and custom training are key to placing 86% of jobseekers in the Greater Boston Hotel Employees list of "Hotels with Excellent Benefits" (as of 2016).

"I was able to participate in a training program where I learned how to clean, improve my English, communicate, and shadow a hotel employee. Now that I am employed at Aloft, I am excited to go back and take banquet training with BEST to continue learning."

– BEST GRADUATE

Year Up In partnership with leading employers in the markets it serves, Year Up connects young adults with companies that need talent. On a per-intern basis, corporate partners make a financial investment in Year Up commensurate with entry-level talent costs. Through the 6-month internship, partners gain access to a diverse pipeline of bright, motivated, and skilled entry-level talent; receive 1-to-1 support from Year Up; and have the opportunity to hire graduates at zero cost; in fact, Year Up's internship-to-hire conversion rate [from the internship host company] is 45%. Year Up is increasingly exploring opportunities to form and deepen national partnership with employers that can host interns across multiple Year Up locations, providing them with additional pathways to scale both income and impact.

"We've partnered with Year Up since 2007 and now host approximately 100 Year Up interns every six months nationally. Year Up does a good job of matching the skills we're looking for with the people they have."

– J.P. MORGAN CHASE & CO. STAFF

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- PER SCHOLAS co-invests with technology employers to customize trainings that fit the employers' needs.
- RESILIENT CODERS has built add-on modules to its 14-week bootcamp to teach employer-specific skills, teaching general coding first and then using a few extra weeks to help students become more competitive for specific employers.
- BFIT has developed "learn and earn" and internship agreements with several employers that

provide paid work experience (employers commit to dedicating a set number of spots to BFIT students), often leading to full-time roles. BFIT's Career Services team also engages with employers on LinkedIn or makes personal calls to help students get placed in jobs.

Catapult Competency 2: Focusing on Good Jobs COMPETENCY OVERVIEW

The second critical competency in the Boston Foundation's framework is simply, but importantly, "Focus on Good Jobs." (See *Leading Practice D*, below, and *The Catapult Papers* for additional discussion on what constitutes a "good job.") While the definition of a good job is different for each individual, the goal of providing one is the same, and the impetus to match people appropriately is even higher in a competitive labor market.

Workforce providers are not the only ones facing pressure to focus on good jobs. For example, Boston Properties, a large self-administered and self-managed real estate investment trust, has recently found it challenging to source tech talent, particularly as a "non-tech" company with high tech needs. Recognizing the changing market dynamics, Boston Properties has "recalibrated" how it goes to market. It has built new office space for its tech team and systematically revisited job titles, compensation, and responsibilities to ensure alignment with the market and what is attractive to applicants. It has also initiated relationships with Next-Gen Workforce Providers to source talent. These partnerships are mutually beneficial—helping Boston Properties fill critical roles and create a talent pipeline and helping Next-Gen Workforce Providers find quality jobs for workers.¹⁴

Candidates from untapped talent pools are especially in need of good jobs that can increase their economic mobility and potential for career growth. For a Next-Gen Workforce Provider, focusing on good jobs requires helping define and identify good jobs for untapped talent, leveraging trusted employer relationships to support these workers long term, and providing training and pathways to bolster advancement and retention (not just placement).

LEADING PRACTICE D: DEFINING AND IDENTIFYING GOOD JOBS

Next-Gen Workforce Providers consciously define “good job” based on the needs of their target population. A good job means something different for each person; for example, an Operation ABLE program participant mentioned that he “did not want to be locked into 40 hours” of work a week, whereas some Per Scholas graduates noted that their top priority in a job is potential for advancement. These Next-Gen Workforce Providers and others have thus tailored their programming to help workers find jobs that meet their needs and aspirations.

Although the definition of a “good job” may be unique to each person, there are some generally considered baseline parameters.

Specifically, Next-Gen

Workforce Providers should seek to support individuals with placement into pathways for full-time roles that provide—at least—living wages (currently around \$18.61/hour in Boston), benefits, and growth opportunities.¹⁵

For example, a Senior Director at Partners HealthCare System recognizes that “many employees are in entry-level roles, and deserve to make a living wage [and get] good benefits.” As such, all Partners employees are offered opportunities and pathways to help them achieve career advancement to gain and exceed a living wage.

BRINGING THIS TO LIFE

RESILIENT CODERS Resilient Coders considers high pay and strong growth opportunities critical to a good job for its bootcamp students. To ensure that its students get these jobs, Resilient Coders requires them to procure, serve, and invoice one freelance client at the end of the program so that they learn how to find their own employment. It also develops partnerships with rising tech companies to help match students into high-growth roles. Resilient Coders clearly defines and identifies good jobs for its population, placing 100%

of graduates in jobs with an average annual salary of ~\$96,000 (for 2019’s first bootcamp).

“We build our program around the number of jobs we feel we can put our students into, and we ensure they are able to access a nice career path through these jobs.”

– RESILIENT CODERS STAFF

BEST HOSPITALITY TRAINING BEST’s goal is to help move people from “low-wage to quality hospitality jobs.” According to BEST, its program participants are often coming out of low-paying jobs with difficult or inflexible hours and just looking for

a better job, even if it is in the same industry. BEST acknowledges its target population’s goals for a quality job (i.e., good wages, comprehensive benefits, job security, worker voice) and matches people to these through job shadowing and apprenticeship programs with some

of Boston’s highest-quality hotels. Moreover, the partnership with Bunker Hill Community College is beneficial for program participants who are seeking greater qualifications and want to advance further in their careers. BEST creates options for people to define what they’re striving for in their careers.

“Our labor partners infuse worker voice in all the positions we prepare jobseekers for. As a result of training, wages, benefits, and worker voice, workers feel valued in the industry.”

– BEST STAFF

“The number one thing I’m looking for in a job is growth opportunities. Whatever experience I get, I always believe I can do more. I stagnate and lose focus if I’m not growing. Plus, better wages come along with it.”

– PER SCHOLAS ALUMNUS

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- **MORE THAN WORDS (MTW)** focuses on matching young adults with what they call “age and stage appropriate” jobs; after seeing that young adults are stable and successful in their first job out of MTW (“A Job”), MTW tries to place these individuals in a better “B Job” or career “C Job.”
- **NECAT** works with employer partners that pay program participants “living” wages and that provide different levels of work so that they can appropriately match people into good jobs.

LEADING PRACTICE E: LEVERAGING TRUSTED EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIPS TO SUPPORT UNTAPPED TALENT IN THE LONG TERM

Beyond placing jobseekers into good jobs, Next-Gen Workforce Providers also work to ensure that jobseekers are satisfied and successful in their roles over the long term. Specifically, they consult with employer partners around the inclusiveness of their hiring, retention, and advancement practices. More broadly, they also seek to help employers foster an environment that values diversity and inclusion, which can help Next-Gen Workforce Providers' program graduates feel a sense of belonging. Several employers observed that this can help them to retain their workers and improve operational efficiencies.

Some examples of leveraging employer relationships to support untapped talent include consistently reviewing job requirements with employers, engaging directly with hiring managers to develop recruiting practices, and encouraging employers to train direct supervisors on how to manage and support the development of new types of talent. Such practices enable greater trust between Next-Gen Workforce Providers and employers and incentivize both parties to continue working together as partners.

BRINGING THIS TO LIFE

JEWISH VOCATIONAL SERVICE (JVS) JVS Boston has been working in this space for more than 80 years and has built strong employer partnerships in the region. With its long-term partners in particular, JVS Boston conducts needs analyses to identify areas where the employer could improve the employee experience and job quality (e.g., scheduling), and consults with these employers on how to make changes so that workers coming from previously untapped talent sources can succeed at the company.

"JVS was good at giving us a reality check—telling us that some workers could make \$1 more per hour elsewhere. They were able to tell us where we were going wrong with our recruitment efforts for a few frontline roles."

— BOSTON CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL STAFF

RESILIENT CODERS Resilient Coders works closely with employers as an intermediary to promote inclusive hiring and retention practices that will help

their students feel comfortable in the workplace. On hiring, Resilient Coders tries to show new ways of evaluating talent (e.g., signaling that students are fast learners via the 14-week bootcamp rather than by standardized assessments); and on retention, they have shared feedback with specific employers to offer implicit bias trainings after learning about the experiences of its students. This cultivates longer-term relationships with employers and good jobs for jobseekers.

"We don't have consensus on what it means to be exclusionary in hiring practices. We have candid conversations with employers where they may have good intentions but may not realize they are exclusionary."

— RESILIENT CODERS STAFF

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- YEAR UP's Grads of Life is a national initiative that catalyzes market demand for young adults (ages 18–24) by seeking to transform employers' perceptions and hiring practices regarding them. It also works with employers in more local contexts to create programs to support alumni (e.g., at J.P. Morgan Chase & Co.'s Boston site, Year Up alumni have a mentorship program specifically for Year Up interns).
- BFIT coaches employer partners on how to effectively work with its students (who all come from different backgrounds) and ways to set these students up for success.

LEADING PRACTICE F: PROVIDING TRAINING AND PATHWAYS FOR ADVANCEMENT AND RETENTION (NOT JUST PLACEMENT)

Once jobseekers have found initial employment, they often seek opportunities to grow in their careers by enhancing their skillsets. Next-Gen Workforce Providers support workers in their career progression by providing avenues for upskilling, i.e., incumbent worker training. Incumbent worker training should be developed in collaboration with employers to help them retain and advance their workforce. Providing this training helps deepen relationships with employers and fortify workers' job security and growth, while also creating a potential fee-for-service revenue stream for Next-Gen Workforce Providers.

Next-Gen Workforce Providers can also work with employers to help them create career pathways for untapped talent and design any trainings needed within those pathways; see *Leading Practice E: Leverage Trusted Employer Relationships to Support Untapped Talent in the Long Term* for additional commentary on this.

— BRINGING THIS TO LIFE —

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF NEW ENGLAND (IINE)

In response to growing employer interest in retaining their workforce, IINE recently launched an incumbent worker training in collaboration with Tufts Medical Center. The program teaches soft skills and customer service principles in health care to employees from all departments (e.g., Environmental Services, Billing). The training is a new way for IINE to earn income for its services and to play a role in upskilling the existing workforce in Boston.

“We’ve had a lot of new interest from employers in retaining their workforce so we are taking a whole different part of the workforce (incumbent workers) and upskilling them.”

— IINE STAFF

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- JVS BOSTON contracts with employers to deliver a wide range of services such as English language instruction, computer skills, college and career readiness, job skill-specific training, and coaching for their employees. This line of business, which generates nearly \$2 million annually, led the organization to develop a team of highly skilled instructors, coaches, and project managers who are deeply embedded with employers, respond rapidly to changing employer needs, deliver high quality services, and address problems when they arise.
- BEST offers incumbent worker training (paid for by employer partners) that teaches English, technology, U.S. citizenship preparation, literacy, skills training, and nationally recognized certifications to help participants advance in their personal and professional lives.
- PER SCHOLAS provides industry-recognized certifications (e.g., CompTIA A+, Network+, Java Web Developer) for program participants seeking advancement.

Catapult Competency 3: Lifting Untapped Talent

COMPETENCY OVERVIEW

The third critical competency for Next-Gen Workforce Providers is “Lifting Untapped Talent.” With this term, the Boston Foundation is referring to non-traditional talent pools, i.e., those who do not have a four-year college degree; it may also include minorities, immigrants, older jobseekers, and others. As mentioned previously, these jobseekers are often disproportionately affected by un- and under-employment issues.

As the labor market continues to tighten, many employers are struggling to find qualified talent from their traditional channels and are increasingly looking to tap into new sources. As noted by one of our interviewees at J.P. Morgan Chase & Co., “There will never be one source of talent to fill all your needs—you’ve got to have multiple channels.” Workforce providers can play a critical role in bridging the gap between untapped talent, which tends to be disconnected from traditional hiring processes, and employers.

As an illustration of how the labor market drove one employer to seek new talent sources (and partner with workforce providers to do it), consider the experience of Partners HealthCare System. Facing hundreds of openings for entry-level Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) positions, Partners turned to community-based organizations, such as JVS Boston and Project Hope, to help source new talent. To prepare this talent for CNA roles, Partners provided a five-week training program, in collaboration with The Academy for Health Care Training and its own Spaulding Rehabilitation Network, including some wraparound support for holistic needs (e.g., child care, transportation). Tapping into this new talent pool required Partners to reconsider its existing eligibility criteria and required skills, strengthen its community partnerships, and provide additional training; all of this now enables Partners to fill more roles with formerly untapped talent.¹⁶

While some employers are starting on the journey to explore populations of untapped talent, Next-Gen Workforce Providers should seek to partner with

employers to upskill these high-potential workers and help them find good jobs. Providers can leverage their deep connections to the communities they serve, which employers may not have. This entails tailoring programs for distinct target populations, providing holistic wraparound supports, offering direct work experience, and maintaining an open door for them to keep coming back. Below, we detail each of these leading practices with supporting examples.

LEADING PRACTICE G: PROVIDING TRAINING AND PATHWAYS OFFERING TAILORED PROGRAMMING FOR TARGET POPULATION

Untapped talent pools often have distinct needs and characteristics that can hinder their ability to take advantage of employment opportunities, such as limited English language abilities, low education levels, criminal justice experience, or having young dependents. Individuals may require more from the job training experience, but few workforce providers are able to meet all populations' distinct needs and challenges. Next-Gen Workforce Providers are able to effectively design and/or partner to provide programming with tailored content, appropriate pedagogical approaches for different learners, language instruction (as needed), and other supports. In addition, Next-Gen Workforce Providers offer cohort-style programs for sometimes-isolated jobseekers who may lack connections to the right networks, enabling participants to empower their peers in the job search process and beyond.

Tailoring programming for the holistic needs of distinct untapped talent pools—and clarifying who the programs are intended for—can make jobseekers more likely to participate in and benefit from these programs. Jobseekers are able to effectively build

“There are a lot of jobs that we are having trouble filling due to market forces. Sometimes training programs aren’t producing enough people, sometimes there’s a mismatch between the talent produced and the skills we need. So, we’ve developed pipeline programs in 11 occupations to upskill folks from within and outside into those roles.”

– BETH ISRAEL DEACONESS
MEDICAL CENTER STAFF

both skills and community that can continue to support them beyond the job training experience. Employers can also benefit by receiving candidates who are more prepared for the workplace. As mentioned throughout this report, not every Next-Gen Workforce Provider is expected to adopt all of these

practices themselves, but rather understand whom they serve best and how, and identify the partnerships or added capacity required to adequately serve their target populations.

BRINGING THIS TO LIFE

NECAT As the labor market in Greater Boston has shifted in recent years, many employers have turned to untapped talent to fill roles. This growing demand has enabled NECAT to become a pipeline for some of Boston’s leading food service employers. NECAT, facing an increase in program participants with challenging personal narratives, realized it needed to tailor its program for these individuals. To prepare program participants for success with leading employers, NECAT has expanded its social-emotional training, hired dedicated case managers, and shifted to a trauma-informed approach to teaching, emphasizing understanding, empathy, and personal coaching. To ensure that staff had the tools to deliver on these changes, NECAT participated in extensive training on the effects of trauma. These efforts have led to a nearly 30% improvement to NECAT’s employment rate at its Boston training site in 2019.

“Students come to us with serious challenges and we incorporate that into the way we teach. We are more than a cooking school; our program is balanced with all of the life skills that people need to help them along the journey.”

– NECAT STAFF

OPERATION ABLE Typically, Operation ABLE's mature workers are returning to work after a gap or are seeking upskilling opportunities for advancement. Operation ABLE offers several programs to meet these varying needs, ranging from basic computer classes to more specialized industry-focused tracks. The organization's staff works with jobseekers individually to understand their needs and coach them accordingly. Moreover, Operation ABLE serves as a safe communal space for all jobseekers, allowing them to continue their relationship with the organization. For those who are not sure where to turn for fundamental career needs and connections, Operation ABLE offers a first step on their career journey.

"I needed to be around other people going through similar things, and I found Operation ABLE. Now I know I'll be ready to go into the workforce – I'm already feeling strong and confident."

– OPERATION ABLE JOBSEEKER

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- IINE offers services ranging from refugee resettlement to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes to support its refugee and immigrant population.
- JUST-A-START offers a cohesive, tuition-free model that embeds technology and career readiness skills, wraparound supports, and employer services to help diverse low-income populations.
- YEAR UP's high support, high expectation model is tailored to create confident, accountable, professional young adults who will thrive in a corporate environment, and has shown strong outcomes for empowering youth.

LEADING PRACTICE H: PROVIDING HOLISTIC WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS

Untapped or non-traditional talent often face different needs than traditional talent pools. These needs often extend beyond the realm of what many might consider "workforce" needs, and may include English language, housing, food, transportation, and others. Next-Gen Workforce Providers recognize the holistic needs of jobseekers and offer wraparound supports

like program stipends (as a means to compensate jobseekers for time spent not employed while in the training program), transportation assistance, coaching, and access to food or clothing. These wraparound supports may be made available internally, or through partnerships or referrals with other community-based organizations.

Wraparound supports help enable candidates from traditionally untapped talent pools to participate in and take full advantage of training programs, reducing their barriers to entering the workforce.

BRINGING THIS TO LIFE

BFIT Many BFIT students come from challenging backgrounds, so BFIT has developed a case management approach to support them beyond the classroom. When a student is admitted, a staff member sits down with him or her for two hours to understand their circumstances and refer them to any wraparound supports needed (e.g., on-campus food pantry, social worker, financial advisor) via the Student Wellness and Support Office. Students can also access Academic Success Centers and meet with coaches. All staff and faculty are coordinated around student success, meeting weekly to check in on "students of concern" and teaching "Life L.O.N.G. (Leadership, Open Communication, Nimble Problem-Solving, and a Growth Mindset) Learning" to students. As a result, BFIT has seen 85% of its graduates join a workplace or continue with education in recent years.

"One thing we do that's unique [compared to others] is to get to know our students very well and make it clear that we care; we anticipate their challenges and put supports around them."

– BFIT STAFF

"They don't let you down here [at BFIT]."

– BFIT ALUMNUS AND CURRENT EMPLOYEE

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- CONNECT serves low-income individuals in urban neighborhoods who require a number of wraparound supports along their career journey. Through its multi-agency model, CONNECT provides help with housing, finances, workforce training, child care, and more.

LEADING PRACTICE I: OFFERING LADDERED WORK EXPERIENCE VIA SOCIAL ENTERPRISE MODEL

While some workforce training programs provide classroom or field instruction, others may offer direct, paid work experience. This is particularly compelling for people from untapped talent pools who may otherwise have limited work experience and struggle to get a job as a result. Next-Gen Workforce Providers can offer work experience—sometimes even a first job—by running a business or social enterprise in-house (“trainers-as-employers”). This can help jobseekers pay bills while developing skills on the job (especially critically important “soft” skills), signal their credibility to future employers, and help workforce providers subsidize their programming costs.

Furthermore, leading “trainers-as-employers” provide participants opportunities for promotion between program levels. Each level is accompanied by increasing responsibility and scaffolded supports to meet participants where they are and help them grow. The supportive but ladder program structure creates an incentive for jobseekers to take the job seriously and learn leadership skills for success in future jobs.

Note: While leading, this practice may not be appropriate for every organization given the additional capacity needed to run a business. More Than Words (MTW) and UTEC were the only two models of this practice observed in this research.^{17,18}

BRINGING THIS TO LIFE

MORE THAN WORDS (MTW) Young adults work ~20 hours/week managing MTW’s online, retail, pop-up and wholesale bookselling businesses and running a high-end event space; they also gain life skills (their “YOU job”) and work experience (their “business job”) while generating revenue that helps offset program costs. The program has four “pods,” or tiers: Trainee, Associate, Partner, and Senior Partner, with each tier accompanied by new expectations, increased responsibilities (e.g., giving feedback, customer service), and greater pay. ~80% of MTW graduates are productively engaged in work and/or school after completing the tiered social enterprise program.

“At More Than Words, you MUST be moving your life and the business forward to get the paycheck. There are distinct responsibilities and privileges that come with each pod. We believe youth won’t be as successful if they don’t go through all levels of the progressive model.”

— MTW STAFF

UTEC UTEC’s three social enterprises (mattress recycling, food services, and woodworking) offer young adults a paid platform for learning applied “soft” skills such as punctuality, problem-solving, and leadership as well as industry-specific skills and certifications. They also provide flexibility for UTEC to close business on certain days and run professional development workshops. Young adults can graduate to higher levels in the program and move up or down within these higher levels; the staged approach allows them to get used to higher expectations and stricter consequences over time while learning a variety of skills to bring to future jobs. As of FY17, ~80% of young adults who left UTEC were employed two years later.

“We started enterprises intentionally so we could set rules, a platform for young adults to be able to fail, and have discussions about their future. For this population, the structure works well—it gives them enough room to deal with their challenges without turning them away.”

— UTEC STAFF

LEADING PRACTICE J: SUPPORTING AND LEVERAGING ALUMNI

For untapped talent pools, participation in workforce development training programs can be just the start of a career journey. Once they graduate from these programs, participants often seek continued engagement and support. Many Next-Gen Workforce Providers actively offer ways for program alumni to stay connected with, represent, and enhance the program. This can include:

- Creating an open-door environment where alumni can come back to get help finding jobs, pursue additional training or credentials, and connect with peers; the latter helps others who may not have access to traditional career networks build a professional alumni network or community

- Involving alumni as thought partners in curriculum development and as role models or advisors for new students in future programming
- Leveraging alumni who are employed by employer partners to collect inputs on employer practices and job openings and improve feedback loops
- Empowering alumni to be ambassadors and storytellers for the organization and its impact
- Through ongoing alumni engagement, Next-Gen Workforce Providers can better serve untapped talent by offering a more holistic and longer-lasting support system and improve their own programs and relationships with employers.

— BRINGING THIS TO LIFE —

PER SCHOLAS Per Scholas has a team dedicated to working with students for two years after program completion as alumni. In Greater Boston, Per Scholas recently graduated its first two classes of students and continues to host them onsite for informal career coaching, financial advising, and advanced training opportunities. Nationally, Per Scholas hires a number of alumni as staff and invites several to serve on the board as ambassadors to inform the organization’s vision. This allows Per Scholas to improve its offerings with former student input, and to better reflect the diversity and needs of the student population. Staff alumni can serve as role models to current students, sharing tips on how to succeed in class and during the job search. Per Scholas has been able to create a true community for alumni.

“It really is like having a recruiter work for you [in reference to a Per Scholas staff member]. They assist you in any way that they can.”

– PER SCHOLAS STAFF

“A good number of our staff are alumni; staff who are alumni can relate in a special way.”

– OMNI HOTELS STAFF

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- RESILIENT CODERS relies on its alumni to share feedback on employers once they are in the workforce, to share advice with current students on how to succeed, and to help shape curriculum based on what they are seeing in the marketplace.

- YEAR UP’s YUPRO program helps graduates with long-term career advancement opportunities, ongoing coaching and training, and professional resources. In just three years of operation, YUPRO has provided career guidance and resources to more than 3,000 Year Up alumni and supported more than 500 alumni in finding jobs and advancing in their careers.
- BEST has created a mentorship program for former graduates to mentor new students and graduates. BEST has a team of 11 trained mentors across eight partner hotels who serve as an additional level of support for newly hired students.
- OPERATION ABLE allows alumni to return and continue receiving further training and assistance.

Catapult Competency 4: Investing in Organizational Capacity

COMPETENCY OVERVIEW

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not discuss some of the leading practices that help power Next-Gen Workforce Providers: the investments they make in their own organizational capacity. It’s a bit like the oxygen mask: You have to put on your own before you can help others. In that spirit, Next-Gen Workforce Providers make intentional investments in their own capabilities, helping them best serve jobseekers and employers.

Employers acknowledge this need, too. Ultimately, they need the most qualified workers they can find, and they need ways of knowing that the people coming through workforce provider partner programs meet that bar. As Partners HealthCare System put it, “We are a mission-driven organization, but we cannot accept individuals who are not well-prepared to work, even in our more entry-level roles; our patients and families come to us for world-class health care, and they must be greeted and cared for by highly skilled, customer-focused team members, who are able to go above and beyond to ensure the right patient experience.” And the same is true for jobseekers. They are placing their trust in workforce providers to provide the training and support they need to build a new livelihood. This simply isn’t possible if the workforce providers are

not investing in their own capacity to run an effective organization.

There is a long list of leading practices we could include on “how to run an effective organization.”

The Next-Gen Workforce

Providers we spoke with are demonstrating practices up and down this list, and these practices are not all listed here (for example, practices we omitted include hiring mission-aligned staff and establishing strong governance systems). The ones we have chosen to highlight here were selected for their relevance to workforce development and/or their relative distinctiveness in the workforce field. They are: Cultivate intentional partnerships with other providers; encourage organizational learning and continuous improvement; leverage technology and data strategically; and explore innovative funding models.

LEADING PRACTICE K: **CULTIVATING INTENTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH OTHER PROVIDERS**

Perhaps the single greatest way to boost organizational capacity is to share that capacity with others. Next-Gen Workforce Providers recognize opportunities to “outsource” services outside of their core competencies, adopting a “don’t have to do it all” mentality.

While partnering might be considered a general best practice, it can be especially critical in the workforce development field, in which untapped talent may have a wide range of needs. Building structured, collaborative partnerships to deliver a broader range of services can thus position workforce providers to better serve the holistic needs of jobseekers and employers. According to Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, “More collaboration across workforce providers would be really helpful for us, as employer partners—especially to have our local neighborhood-based community-based organizations partner with the larger, more sophisticated ones, who understand our workforce needs and train many qualified candidates. This could connect more local people to our jobs.”

“Year Up is an amazing partner because of their ability to evolve with us. It’s not just where we are but where we’re going. Their ability to learn and grow with us is huge.”

– J.P. MORGAN CHASE & CO. STAFF

It is worth remembering (particularly for funders) that effective collaboration requires an investment of resources, as well as a reduction in the competitive nature of the nonprofit field (*see more on these two points in: Gaps and*

Opportunities in Greater Boston’s Workforce Development Ecosystem, page 29). Nonetheless, even simple mentorship or learning relationships with other organizations can be valuable, especially for newer workforce providers in the Boston region.

BRINGING THIS TO LIFE

CONNECT By co-locating, integrating, and collectively managing the services of five agencies (Bunker Hill Community College, MassHire Metro North, Metro Credit Union, Metro Housing Boston, and The Neighborhood Developers), CONNECT is able to achieve greater impact for clients and greater efficiencies for service providers. CONNECT is also strategic in building external partnerships to expand the resources offered to its constituents, such as delivering partner-led training in customized ways in order to help participants qualify for jobs. For example, when the Encore casino and resort opened near Chelsea, CONNECT partnered with IINE to provide hospitality and financial capability trainings to Chelsea residents, boosting their chance of finding a job at the new property.

“We decided we should work with existing training providers vs. coming up with our own—partnerships are in our DNA, and co-location is necessary!”

– CONNECT STAFF

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- JUST-A-START has created strong partnerships with other community organizations to support students before, during, and after they participate in Just-A-Start’s programming, including bridge programming and community college.

LEADING PRACTICE L: ENCOURAGING ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Next-Gen Workforce Providers have largely become “next-gen” by constantly asking what they can do better, being willing to evolve, and building the internal capabilities to support continuous learning and adaptation. This often means undergoing rigorous evaluation and being open to iteration and failure. It also requires investing in leadership, staff, professional development, and all other elements that make for a strong enterprise.

In workforce development, it is especially important to hone these organizational sensing mechanisms in order to adapt to changing market conditions or, relatedly, changes in the needs of the people the program serves. For example, some workforce providers shared with us an increasing need for English language classes among their program applicants.

Building systems that collect and incorporate participant voices in program design (feedback loops) can be a particularly effective way to help ensure that programs are keeping participants at the center and evolving to meet their needs, and that the organization is consistently learning and growing.

BRINGING THIS TO LIFE

NECAT In considering its critical success factors, NECAT points to its organizational orientation toward perpetual learning. Importantly, this has the full support of NECAT’s board, enabling the organization to prioritize this need. Examples include:

- Reserving two days between every program cycle to invest in professional development and adapt the curriculum based on participant feedback and market needs
- Hosting an external training (6-session workshop) for staff on adopting a trauma-informed approach to their work
- Adding basic skills, like note-taking and listening, into the curriculum upon realizing this may be a gap for the target population

“Each cohort ends with a debrief—we look at our failures and ask how do we fix this and at our successes and say how can we do even better?”

– NECAT STAFF

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- YEAR UP and PER SCHOLAS have both participated in gold standard Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) to assess their impact. Though rigorous and time-consuming (in their cases lasting two to three years), they have enabled the organizations to continue strengthening their programs, as well as to clearly communicate their impact.¹⁹
- RESILIENT CODERS conducts a “tour of why not” with employers who do not hire their students, in order to understand how they might improve their programming and place students there in the future. They also survey ex-participants (alumni) to make real-time changes to programming.

LEADING PRACTICE M: LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY AND DATA STRATEGICALLY

It is no great secret that using technology to enable data collection and inform decision-making is a generally accepted leading practice. This holds true for Next-Gen Workforce Providers, too. More specifically, we would like to highlight three specific use cases that surfaced in the context of workforce development:

- **To support innovative program delivery:** Next-Gen Workforce Providers are increasingly experimenting with hybrid training solutions that combine in-person and remote delivery to offer more flexibility to participants and reach new populations (such as those who may not be able to stop working to take a full-time training course, for instance).
- **To indicate program quality:** Employers emphasized that before partnering with a workforce provider, they have to know that the provider can connect them to quality talent. This means workforce providers must be able to tell a clear and compelling story about their own impact, supported by data. As one employer said when asked how she thinks about workforce provider

partnerships, “What about their stats? JVS has a [very high] pass rate. That’s important to us. What’s the size of the nonprofit? How long have they been doing the work? All of these things help us paint a clearer picture.”

- **To track client outcomes cohesively across a set of shared services and/or success metrics:** Cultivating intentional partnerships with other providers to refer participants to needed services should be accompanied by integrated data tracking across providers to maintain a singular view of participants and their progress. This can help Next-Gen Workforce Providers show collaborative, meaningful impact to funders against a unified set of metrics.

BRINGING THIS TO LIFE

CONNECT Collaboration across CONNECT’s five agencies is supported by a secure, shared customer relationship management (CRM) platform. Each agency has access to the shared system, enabling any CONNECT member to quickly see and track an individual participant’s journey (e.g., services received, bundling behaviors, outcomes, even referrals to other community partners) in order to provide them with appropriate services. This integrated system allows CONNECT to holistically measure change in income, credit score, housing status, debt, and other key metrics, which it uses to indicate the quality and comprehensiveness of its programming to employers and jobseekers.

“Partner agencies share the CRM platform to track participant data in an integrated way—it is a godsend and our lifeblood.”

—CONNECT STAFF

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- BEST constantly innovates on incorporating technology to improve learning gains and offer alternative ways to study beyond the classroom.

LEADING PRACTICE N: EXPLORING INNOVATIVE FUNDING MODELS

Exploring innovative funding models can help improve financial sustainability by making organizations more resilient to changes in any one source of funds. Some workforce-specific ways we saw this manifest include: increasing earned revenue from employers, establishing a social enterprise in-house, and tapping into non-workforce development-related public funding streams that support the same target population (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program funds, Department of Transitional Assistance funds). Many organizations we spoke with also expressed interest in increasing employer funding for training (especially customized training), though few workforce providers are doing this today; *see additional detail in Leading Practice C: Create Talent Supplier Agreements, Including Customized Employer Training.*

BRINGING THIS TO LIFE

YEAR UP Year Up receives earned revenue from employer partners hosting Year Up interns; in 2019, internship revenues accounted for 45% of Year Up’s total revenues. This strategy is supported by a robust infrastructure within Year Up: National and local Corporate Engagement teams find employers that need interns and would be a good fit for Year Up. Once the employer is committed, Account Managers oversee the relationships throughout the year, ensuring both the employer and the interns have a positive experience. Year Up has uncovered an innovative source of funding via employers by becoming a talent supplier.

“Year Up’s mission to have students find internships is not only a moral goal, but a financially sustainable one. ‘If our retention rates are higher, we’re going to send more students to internships and we’ll make more money,’ [former Year Up employee] Lisa Chin said. ‘If we lose more students, we’ll make less money.’”

—FROM GEEKWIRE²⁰

MORE THAN WORDS More Than Words generates 44% of its annual revenue from its social enterprise. Young adult employees collect books and other items via donation trucks daily, and then sell these products for a profit via multiple channels; they

also sell products from other local social enterprises in stores. This integrated business model allows MTW to be less reliant on external sources of funding and focus on advancing its vision. As stated in its 2018 Annual Report, “Through our innovative social enterprise, youth contribute directly to their futures and our bottom line by generating revenue that offsets the cost of services.

“Our highly sustainable hybrid-funding model means we can do more with every philanthropic dollar, putting them to work for our youth.”

– MORE THAN WORDS 2018 ANNUAL REPORT

OTHER NOTABLE EXAMPLES:

- NECAT seeks funding from both public and private sources, looking beyond workforce development funds alone. For example, NECAT recently accessed pilot grants targeted to programs serving individuals receiving public benefits, returning to the community from incarceration, and in the transitional phase of substance abuse recovery.
- UTEC generates 14% of its annual revenue from its three in-house social enterprises.
- PER SCHOLAS increases its revenue by co-investing with technology employers to customize trainings.