

# Creating Authentic Partnerships to Maximize Value and Mutually Beneficial Gains for Job seekers, Workforce Organizations and Employers

Southeast Michigan Workforce Leadership Academy

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## Executive Summary

In today's ever-evolving job market, establishing genuine partnerships between job seekers, workforce organizations, and employers is paramount for achieving positive outcomes. The central aim of this project is to uncover strategies and practices that can enhance the effectiveness of workforce organizations in facilitating successful job placements while simultaneously meeting the needs and expectations of jobseekers, employers and workforce development organizations. To achieve this goal, the team conducted comprehensive interviews with stakeholders, collected data from various sources, and analyzed local and national employer engagement trends.

The research identified key factors that employers consider of candidates when making hiring decisions. These include assessing the holistic qualities of candidates, setting clear expectations, valuing actions over words, seeking talent parity, and highlighting adaptability. Conversely, reasons for not hiring candidates often relate to a lack of alignment with job requirements, insufficient preparation, and inadequate research about the organization. To establish productive partnerships with businesses, workforce development organizations must understand their partners' products, business strategies, and contributions to the bottom line. A shift from a transactional to a relational approach, where partners are viewed as valuable resources within the business realm is essential for sustainability.

## Context

The Employer Engagement Team Co-Lab is comprised of two leaders who represent a well-established training provider and community college, two leaders from workforce development/funding agencies in the City of Detroit and Macomb County, one leader the healthcare sector, and one leader who manages a reentry workforce program for justice involved jobseekers. The team first developed an essential question from which to springboard research, *"How might we create a true partnership with employers to co-create solutions that are a win-win for job seekers, workforce organizations and employers?"* Next, the team identified stakeholder groups that would deepen our understanding of the issue and formulated unique sets of questions for each stakeholder group. Fourteen representatives were interviewed from across a few business sectors, economic

development groups, government agencies, and job seekers themselves. The research process included reviewing literary sources, examining statistical data, and analyzing labor market information. Local trends and national employer engagement practices were also considered.

## Key Findings from Interviews

- Many employers don't realize exactly what workforce development agencies offer and what the benefits can be to their bottom line.
- There is no parity (equity) between businesses and workforce development agencies who are working together with one party feeling subordinate or like it's getting the short end of the stick.
- Jobseekers who should be the most valuable asset between employers and workforce agencies are often an afterthought and sometimes feel overlooked by extremely busy case managers. They expressed that training options could be better aligned with in-demand industries paying a living wage.
- Workforce agencies have difficulty designing programs that are human-centered and not metrics driven, because it threatens their economic sustainability.

## Policy Alternatives

The team researched the efforts that have already been made to create win-wins and strengthen employer, workforce, and job seeker partnerships. One major development occurred in July 2014 when the **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act** was written into law. Known as WIOA, it is designed to "help job seekers access employment, education, training, and support services to succeed in the labor market and to match employers with the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy." It was a more holistic upgrade from the training-driven Workforce Investment Act (WIA) which had been in effect since 1998. Through the WIOA policy, the US Department of Labor is able to administer funds to state workforce agencies for them to disseminate at the local level for implementation of comprehensive Youth and Adult programs. While it is far more cutting edge than its WIA predecessor, WIOA still holds a number of restrictions that may hinder the development of win-win partnerships.

The system redesign that produced **Detroit at Work** in February 2017 revolutionized the City of Detroit's workforce ecosystem and dramatically improved partnerships between businesses, service providers and job seekers which led to improved outcomes. According to the National Bureau of Labor Statistics reporting at the end of 2022, Detroit's unemployment rate was 7%, the lowest it had been in 20 years. The Detroit at Work model synergizes under one brand: several workforce organizations serving job seekers through neighborhood career centers, Detroit Employment Solutions Corporation (DESC), which serves as the administrative and fiduciary agency, and the Mayor's Workforce Development Board which is responsible for strategy, attracting funders and businesses. Detroit at Work offers innovative programming to upskill incumbent workers such as its Skills for Life program. The JumpStart Program works with 18 community based mentor organizations to connect long-time unemployed participants to career readiness training, high school completion, occupational training, and/or employment. Both the participants and mentor organizations are incentivized for progress using federal ARPA funds.

Detroit at Work utilizes technology to make employment opportunities more accessible to job seekers through its website and **Ready to Hire** portal. The portal automatically identifies 'matches' from a pool of thousands of managed job orders to job seekers based on their skills and interests. Once a job seeker profile has been created and resume uploaded, they may apply to multiple positions with the

push of a button from their cell phones. However, the employers do not have access to the data management system or portal. The career center's Talent Sourcing Specialist tracks and documents in the data management system their clients' progress along the referred, interviewed, and hired continuum. While Detroit at Work programs and strategies are promising, more research may be needed to determine if they can be scaled or replicated to gain results in other contexts and regions of SE Michigan.

**Detroit Regional Workforce Alliance (DRWA)** is a collaboration among the six largest community-based nonprofit workforce development organizations in the Detroit region, Access, Focus HOPE, Goodwill, Geshel, SER Metro-Detroit, and MiSide (fka Southwest Solutions). Their mission is to connect job seekers in Detroit with rewarding career options, provide workforce opportunities and workforce system advocacy. It has a Job Board that provides jobseekers with access to all of the partners' job search databases in one location and it updates in real time.

In Madison, WI the **Raise Program**, which stands for Referrals and Interviews for Sustainable Employment, is designed to match qualified individuals to employment. All companies who contract with the City of Madison (and are non-exempt) are required to complete an Equitable Workforce Plan and agree to: 1) Submit their job posting(s) to the Department of Civil Rights before advertising anywhere else if the job is located within the county; and 2) Guarantee an interview for candidates referred by the Department of Civil Rights. In addition to completing whichever application process the contracted company has, job seekers must be referred by one of 20+ Authorized Referral Agencies, which include workforce development agencies, community and faith-based organizations, schools and colleges, YWCA and the Urban League. The partner referral is what establishes job seeker participation in the Raise Program and guarantees them an interview with participating businesses. They can access the job postings on the City of Wisconsin's website, which are listed periodically in .pdf form.

## Policy Recommendations

Through our research and collaborative analysis, the team discovered 'low-hanging fruit' or small, yet impactful changes that can be made with little resistance and little to no expense.

- Workforce Organizations and Service Providers can:
  - Develop a Cost Benefit Analysis for workforce development services, i.e. Quality of Work Candidates, Job placement, Job Retention to demonstrate competitive value over temp agencies, online job search engines, or employers' direct recruitment
  - Involve area businesses in the design of training programs and essential skills curricula that lift up the nuanced qualities that their high-demand industries are seeking
  - Make the business partner an integral part of the "fabric" of the organization by gaining their input in areas where companies excel, such as marketing and outreach
  - Invest the time to learn what your business partners do, their structure, industry needs and challenges, their lingo, their growth opportunities
- Government and Economic Development Agencies can:
  - Establish partnership agreements between businesses and WDAs or CBOs that ensures accountability on all sides and guarantees a job seeker benefit: i.e. guaranteed interview, priority consideration, push for living wages

- Develop a better connected ecosystem by creating more opportunities for workforce organizations, trainers, colleges, businesses and job seekers to interface, such as annual conferences, city/county wide job and resource fairs, and streamlining digital communication tools so multiple stakeholder groups can be made aware of their counterparts' services
- Businesses can:
  - Value workforce organizations as field experts who help build job seeker capacity and not simply order-takers whose only role is to fill an employment pipeline
  - Enhance your Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility practices by acquiring workforce organization services to develop a workforce pool through contextualized training and upskill incumbent workers for advancement
- Everyone:
  - Build in redundancy so partnerships aren't hampered by change in staff

## Call to Action

Our call to action will address two of five key activities that drive systems change, *Coordinate or Improve System Components* and *Scale or Replicate Strategies or Solutions*. The following are projects that can be taken on together or separately, by a single entity or a consortium of partners.

- **WorkStreams SE Michigan: There's an App for That!** A powerful, all-encompassing concierge service and workforce development app designed to foster collaboration, transparency, and mutual success among all stakeholders in the region. The concierge service is staffed by real life human(s) directing callers to the appropriate stakeholder, similar to Michigan's 211 service. It bridges the digital divide for members of the job-seeking population who either don't have access to technology or limited tech aptitude. The app goes a step further than Detroit at Work's Portal and the DRWA Job Board in that it engages all end-users through customizable features based on their roles. The workforce agencies would have an access point, businesses would have uniquely tailored access, and job seekers would have access for job search and employment retention support. Think Uber Driver, Uber Rider, or Uber Eats. Three different functions being coordinated on the same platform.
- **Business Partner Report Card:** A tool that identifies criteria for success based on established partnership agreements. Data from this tool would help inform decision making of government, economic development, or workforce agencies. Categories to be graded might include: Communication, Efficiency in Hiring, Fairness, Job Quality, Workplace Culture, and Employee Retention. A similar tool was developed by Detroit Employment Solutions Corporation to grade training partners and monitor adherence to their Master Training Agreement. This could be replicated in a new context of business and WDA partnerships and scaled to benefit all of SE Michigan.

If these proposed projects are combined, they will have an estimated price tag of \$150-300K to launch. This may include the first year of salary and benefits for the concierge staff, app development, research, data entry, licensing, design, printing, focus group testing, and marketing.

**Consulted or Recommended Sources:**

- Literature and resource review
  - SEMCOG. org - local employment data
  - Workforce Intelligence Network (WIN)- Labor Market Reports
  - *Goals & Dimensions of Employer Engagement in Workforce Dev.*, Urban Institute
  - *Changing Workforce Systems*, Urban Institute
  - *What Makes Research Actionable*, Paul Spector (Video of Keynote Address)
  - *Blueprint for Detroit's Future*, Detroit Future City
  - *Missing Workers and Missing Jobs Since the Pandemic*, Federal Reserve Article
  - *To Build Back Better, Job Quality is Key*, Aspen/Corporation for Skilled Workforce
  - Other websites: Detroitwra.org, CityofMadison.com, and WorkforceDetroit.com
  
- Stakeholder Interviews were comprised of national and regional voices
  - Workforce Organizations: Michigan Works, Eastbay Works (CA)
  - Businesses/Unions: Chase Bank (CA), Better Lives of Southfield, Trinity Health, Corewell Health, U of M Health, Franklin Safety Group, Operating Engineers OE824
  - Government: City of Detroit Human Resources Department, Michigan Rehabilitation Services, Macomb County Planning & Economic Development
  - Job Seekers: 53 year-old and 46 year-old Skills for Life participants