LOCAL AREA WORKFORCE PLANNING GUIDE

A Guide for Community Planning and Engagement

OKLAHOMA WORKS TOGETHER
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OVERVIEW

Regardless of location and strength of economy, communities across Oklahoma can identify challenges with the available workforce and inefficiencies in the systems that support the local economy.

However, the same communities can also pinpoint resources, programs and institutions that actively support job makers and job seekers. No matter how much is already happening or how well it is happening, community stakeholders could likely suggest ways to make it better. "Building a Better Workforce" can be more than a slogan — it can become the constant focus of every community that wants to achieve greater economic success for its residents and for its businesses. By aligning its local workforce resources within a framework customized to meet the needs of local businesses, each of these communities can achieve success in building a better workforce. Working collaboratively communities can:

> » Facilitate alignment of workforce resources within the local area.
> » Perform outreach and advocacy functions.
> » Offer training aligned with local labor market needs.
> » Deliver training approved by workforce development boards.
> » Provide career awareness and job placement services.
> » Provide business support services.

This guide will help communities step through a proven process of aligning and leveraging existing resources to facilitate the development of a workforce program for their community.

IDENTIFY A LEAD ORGANIZATION.

The first step in aligning local workforce development resources is to identify one organization to lead the effort. This lead organization will oversee the effort of engaging stakeholders and strategically aligning and applying the resources in support of identified goals and objectives. It is vital that the lead organization has the credibility, capacity and resources to perform in a leadership role and is committed to taking a results-oriented approach. Possible sources for lead organizations include the following:

BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY ENTITIES

The private sector is the ultimate benefactor of local workforce development efforts. It also has important communication networks that can bring other stakeholders together around a shared effort. Private sector entities also have resources to contribute in support of alignment activities.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Many communities have economic development organizations charged with improving and sustaining the local economy. These organizations can be valuable in a leadership role depending on their available resources and level of influence. Some communities have organized industrial districts, such as industrial parks, established to help drive economic development. These entities can offer significant resources,

influence and talent to contribute to workforce development efforts.

CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

Most communities have a chamber of commerce. The chamber is typically the center of local economic development efforts. Although they vary from one community to another, a chamber of commerce can have the influence needed to coordinate alignment activities.

STATE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

State agencies can be ideal partners by providing personnel who often have extensive experience in workforce development planning and implementation. Potential state agencies include offices of the Oklahoma Employment Security Commission and the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, Office of Workforce Development, along with local area workforce development boards.

EDUCATION ENTITIES

Education entities, including CareerTech technology centers and Higher Education institutions, can often contribute substantial expertise and other resources necessary to lead engagement and alignment efforts.

CONSORTIUM APPROACH

A consortium approach could be appropriate when multiple communities within an area or region have insufficient leadership resources to take action alone. Consortia are strategic partnerships among industry, educators, workforce systems and others who collaborate to define a community's or a region's talent needs and who develop solutions to meet those needs. A formal written agreement among the consortium members in which responsibilities and commitments are spelled out creates the consortium. By leveraging the resources among multiple communities, the necessary leadership may become available.

ACTION ITEM

Key stakeholders should establish a list of potential lead organizations and evaluate their capacity to assume lead role.

IDENTIFY AND ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS

Once a lead organization is in place, the next step is to identify and engage with the stakeholders of workforce development efforts. Stakeholders in each community or region include those who rely upon, and have interest in, the success of an efficient and effective workforce development system. These stakeholders will provide essential input for establishing the workforce system. They are also vital in sustaining ongoing workforce development activities. Potential stakeholders — and what each stakeholder can bring to the table — include the following:

BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY GROUPS

Participation by local business and industry representatives is essential to ensure that efforts are relevant and supported. Industry-specific organizations may serve training and employment needs within their industries and can be sources for apprenticeship and other work-based learning opportunities. Private education and trade-related organizations also represent industry-sector associations and provide a source of prospective workers.

CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

In addition to leadership, chambers of commerce can provide planning expertise and networking opportunities.

PK-12 EDUCATION DISTRICTS

Public education organizations are the starting point for awareness and education activities aligned to career pathways. They also serve as sources of experienced educators and successful work-based education activities.

CAREERTECH TECHNOLOGY CENTERS

Technology centers within Oklahoma's career and technology education system have longstanding experience in training to meet industry needs. They have experience in working with partnerships and advisory boards, establishing work-based learning activities and using labor market data. Technology centers are accredited and use curriculum that aligns with workforce demands. A technology center district also has world-class training facilities, training for industry credentials and provides a range of services.

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Oklahoma colleges and universities can deliver accredited programs and courses important for advancement in many careers. The higher education system has facilities located across the state that can be leveraged for education and training programs. They also provide industry relevant micro-credentials, Higher Learning Commission accreditation and access to the OneNet system.

STATE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Local/regional offices of state agencies may have personnel who have extensive experience in workforce development planning and implementation. These agencies are a source for workforce/employment data and offer supportive services.

TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS

Tribal governments provide education and career services to Native American populations across the state. They also advise on the issues and needs of their citizens and provide significant resources for prospective workers within a region.

INDUSTRY RELATED ORGANIZATIONS

These organizations can provide valuable resources, expert knowledge and industry sector connections which can significantly support and enhance the overall workforce development effort and resulting system.

ACTION ITEM

Establish an Advisory Committee of key stakeholders who meet regularly to evaluate and address the local workforce system.

GET A VIEW OF THE WORKFORCE LANDSCAPE

Once the lead organization and its advisory team identifies community stakeholders, it is important to develop a 360-degree view of the existing workforce landscape and the perceptions of it. Focus groups can help to develop this view. Topics for questions in a focus group process should include:

PERCEPTIONS

What are the perceptions of the various stakeholders? The lead organization and its advisory team of stakeholders should seek to understand (1) the levels of awareness of the local workforce ecosystem, (2) perceptions of the system, (3) in-demand jobs and skills within the region and (4) the most appropriate and effective methods to communicate with the various stakeholders. It is also important to identify potential misperceptions so they can be addressed.

CURRENT SYSTEM(S)

What assets already exist that can contribute to workforce development efforts? Many existing resources can contribute to building and improving local workforce development systems. Although the availability of resources varies among communities, each community has important assets that can make a significant impact. Many of these assets are the exact services that stakeholders already have in place. Often, inadequate awareness of these resources exists, resulting in misalignment of resources or duplication of effort.

WORKFORCE DEMANDS

What should be the target of workforce development efforts? In seeking understanding of its labor market environment, a community must analyze the prevailing workforce demands within the community or region. To effectively address those needs, the process must have a clear target and focus. This will vary from community to community and will require different strategies and approaches for solving the workforce puzzle. However, it is probable that commonalities exist among the skills requirements of multiple employers. These commonalities can represent opportunities for economies of scale with regard to leveraging system implementation and sustainment resources.

SYSTEM GAPS

What gaps exist in the existing workforce development system? This is one of the most important outcomes of the focus group process. Acknowledging and analyzing gaps will serve to organize much of the overall effort of system development and alignment. Gaps often stem from

a lack of resources, lack of awareness of resources or misaligned resources and approaches.

Focus groups can encompass the stakeholders described above within three overarching categories: the education community, the local community and the employer community. In addition to identifying issues of concern to the participants, the focus group process can also initiate a collaborative and mutually beneficial relationship among the participants.

Convene focus groups representing the local education community. These focus group sessions should seek to understand the perceptions of local employment opportunities. Statistics show that the majority of a local workforce is homegrown. As a result, local school systems are a critical source of potential employees. Workforce development efforts can only show results with buy-in from administrators, educators and students representing K-12, CareerTech and Higher Education institutions. Separate focus group sessions can include school/district/institution administrators; instructors, faculty, and staff; and students. Parents and guardians of students can also participate in education community focus groups.

Convene focus groups representing the local community. These focus group sessions should seek to understand the unique viewpoints of individuals who work directly with workforce development issues. (The focus group process can also help ensure that community leaders maintain a personal interest in and commitment to workforce development efforts.) Separate focus group sessions can include local elected officials; chambers of commerce representatives; and key community leaders.

Convene focus groups representing the employer community. These focus group sessions should seek to identify workforce needs as well as employer perceptions of available resources. Employers are the ultimate benefactor of any workforce development system. Their involvement is essential. Employers may be well aware of workforce needs but may be less aware of the resources in a community to leverage in support of workforce development. Separate focus group sessions can include employer and business leaders and economic developers. Employer satisfaction surveys can also provide relevant input from area employers and businesses.

ACTION ITEM

Develop a community asset map which identifies available resources to leverage in the development of the system as well as potential gaps to be filled. Catalog an inventory of community perceptions and develop a plan of action to address any deficiencies or concerns.

LAY THE FOUNDATION FOR WORKFORCE EXCELLENCE

The focus group process should yield sets of stakeholder issues and observations, an understanding of perceptions and an inventory of available resources. Stakeholders are now engaged and have a commitment to contributing to the larger workforce development effort. Most importantly, a lead organization has assumed responsibility for directing the effort of aligning local resources to define a Workforce Center of Excellence.

The next step is to lay the foundation for planning and sustaining local workforce development efforts. Key building blocks of this foundation include the following:

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Based upon the results of the focus group sessions, the lead organization and its advisory team should begin the work of aligning resources to develop, support and sustain ongoing workforce needs. Strategic planning is the ideal tool for this work. A qualified external party should assist with this work, such as a consultant or facilitators from a CareerTech technology center, a higher education institution or other local resource.

ACTION ITEM

The strategic planning process should culminate in action plans. Action plans serve as the plan of work for the lead organization, its advisory team and other participating stakeholders. Each action plan should relate to goals and objectives identified during the planning process. Action plans should document the specific commitments of all stakeholders, as well as their respective roles and responsibilities in implementing the action plans. Action plans must also account for the processes that will lead to the achievement of set goals. These processes should document how the community will build skills, recruit prospective students and job seekers and apply resources in support of education, training and placement efforts.

CAREER PATHWAYS

Identifiable career and educational pathways can serve as a road map for developing the skills that align with local career opportunities. Each pathway identifies activities, resources and opportunities to guide an individual through the process of developing skills relevant to a chosen career path.

SUSTAINMENT RESOURCES

The lead organization, its advisory team and participating stakeholders must secure their workforce excellence plans. This happens by identifying and obtaining the resources required to adequately support the implementation of action plans as well as the ongoing development of new action plans. Engaged stakeholders and external funding streams should contribute to the invested resources.

Apply the steps above to formalize the local workforce development framework and strategic plan. These will be dynamic, living documents that should be regularly evaluated and modified to maintain relevance with local workforce demands.

PLAN FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The partners and stakeholders in local workforce development efforts should realize that the work will never be finished. The needs of the local labor market and of the larger economy are constantly changing. A long-term vision for local workforce development should embrace the concept and practice of continuous improvement. Key elements of continuous improvement can include the following:

COMMITTED LEADERSHIP

The single most important element to ensure success is committed leadership. This means leaders who embrace outside-the-box thinking, 21st century learning tools and risk-taking in pursuit of worthwhile goals.

FREQUENT COMMUNICATION

Planned and frequent communication is vital for ensuring that the workforce development system remains relevant to employer needs. Formal and informal avenues of communication should facilitate discussion of issues and collaboration on strategies for achievement.

EXPERT ADVISEMENT

Subject matter experts should be recruited for advisory groups to provide front-line input to strategy development and maintenance. These same individuals can also become ambassadors for local workforce efforts and serve as mentors within the community.

ONGOING SYSTEM SUPPORT

In addition to leveraging existing resources to support workforce development efforts, the partners and stakeholders must remain alert to the need for new resources and ways to deploy them toward achievement of collaborative goals.

ACTION ITEM

The workforce advisory council must establish the plan for continuous improvement that engages business and industry to ensure long-term sustainability and quality of the system.