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What works in workforce development?

People having jobs is the first step to eliminating poverty. Historically, programs aimed at reducing poverty have focused on placement – attaching unemployed adults to the labor force in the first available job. Social scientists and human resource professionals believe that adults learn work attitudes and behaviors by actually practicing them in a real setting. However, we have learned that there is much more to the notion of increasing employment than simply helping a person to get a job.

Contemporary approaches to workforce development will benefit both employees and employers through:

- **Human capital development.** The idea of providing people with education and training as a *precursor* to a specific type of employment has shown promise in moving low-skill, low-wage workers into stable jobs with greater chance for advancement compared to the practice of placing workers in any available job.
- **Paying attention to the needs of employers as well as workers.** Workforce development programs work best when the outcomes are defined in terms of meeting the needs of employers, not just placing workers in any job.
- **After-placement guidance and support.** Research shows that most often it is logistical issues such as transportation and child care that lead to early failure in employment for those in workforce development programs.
- **Developing life skills.** Many times hard-to-place workers are terminated because of their lack of life skills, not their ability to perform work tasks. Dependability, attitude, and the ability to communicate and get along with co-workers are essential skills that can be overlooked in traditional training programs.
- **Supporting workers in removing individual and family barriers,** such as substance abuse and domestic violence.

How does workforce development work?

Successful workforce development involves partnerships among employers, employees, community agencies, and public policy.

Role of Employers - provide job opportunities, train supervisors and adopt workplace policies to accommodate the diverse characteristics of a new workforce, collaborate with community agencies to provide job retention services, assist low-income workers in enhancing incomes (e.g., using Earned Income Tax Credit).

Role of Employees - use community resources and networks to obtain and sustain employment.

Role of Community Agencies - provide basic skills training targeted to a specific industry or workplace, assist prospective workers to deal with personal barriers (such as transportation, child care, and appropriate work place behavior).

Role of Public Policy - Job stability and career advancement - not just placement - must be explicit policy goals.

Workforce Development: What's working in Grand Rapids?

Business leaders, community organizations, and public agencies are teaming up in Grand Rapids to provide opportunities for underemployed job seekers.

Work Progressions is a local comprehensive collaborative approach to workforce development that entails close partnership between human services organizations, employees, and the business community. The program provides a pathway for individuals to gain entry-level workplace competencies and then transition to better-paying jobs. Businesses help human service organizations (HSOs) understand work environments, job expectations, and work progressions while the HSOs provide continued support services throughout employee orientation and training.

Cascade Engineering and *Butterball Farms* have engaged in innovative partnerships with the *Family Independence Agency (FIA)*. An on-site caseworker helps employees remove employment barriers, such as finding reliable transportation and child care or improving language skills. In addition, the employers provide training for both employees and supervisors on the hidden rules of poverty and the middle class (based on Ruby Payne's book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*), diversity, and corporate culture.

As a result of the innovative partnership with FIA, both Butterball and Cascade have experienced a large reduction in turnover. Cascade's retention rate for FIA placements is around 90% and Butterball's retention rate has more than doubled in the past two years.